

# addressing students' language needs in a bilingual asl and english classroom

By C. Michelle Shadow, Bobbie Jo Kite, and Jen Drew

In the fall of 2008, we (co-teachers Michelle and Bobbie Jo) began team teaching in a bilingual American Sign Language (ASL)/English classroom. We faced the same challenge teachers everywhere face: a new year with new goals and a classroom of students with diverse learning needs. In our case, we had 10 first grade students who read and did math on several different grade levels and used two languages—ASL and English—with varying levels of proficiency. Two students came from homes where languages other than English and ASL were used, and some students had additional learning challenges ranging from memory processing problems to Autism Spectrum Disorder. Later in the year, two more students and another teacher (Jen) joined the class.

Our goal was simple: To develop students who are bilingual language users while making strong academic progress. Our enthusiasm for this effort was high, but we also recognized the difficulty of the tasks ahead of us. After all, we were being asked almost immediately how we were going to meet all the needs of our students, and how we were going to use both ASL and spoken English when not all of our students had access to both languages. These were questions that we had just begun to explore.

We started by carefully reviewing the needs of each student and the content and skills we needed to cover over the next year. This information was then used to construct learning environments that would meet the needs of all our students, and that proved to be a struggle at the beginning. A critical component of bilingual classrooms is helping students understand that the two languages are different and must be kept separate. Based on that, we initially decided that the best approach to instruction was to separate students into two learning groups based on their primary language use. This made sense to us; after all, we had students who were learning written English through spoken English. We also had students who were making good progress using ASL to learn written English.



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Using primary language use as the deciding factor, we placed eight students into one instructional group and two into the second group. When we evaluated that approach a month later, it was clear that it wasn't working. The group of eight students read on six different grade levels and four math levels, and the teacher for that group was struggling to meet each student's needs. Upon re-evaluating our goals, we realized that we'd set up the classroom with language use as the most important thing we wanted our students to internalize. This was not what we wanted; academic knowledge and critical thinking skills are as important as fluency in both languages.

Based on our review, we changed the groupings to reflect academic needs. The result was two groups with an equal number of students in each; the two students who benefited from spoken English had similar academic needs and were placed together in the group with the teacher who had begun the year as the spoken language teacher. We then adopted a new approach to developing bilingual proficiency and an appreciation for both languages in our students.

### What is the Goal?

How information is communicated to students affects their learning, and the method of information transmission should be considered for each part of the school day. Therefore, we decided that the best approach to developing bilingual proficiency and appreciation would be making careful choices about language use based on the goal of the activity or lesson taking place at the moment. As a result, we would be code-switching throughout the day.

For example, how would you respond to a student who walked up to you and used spoken English to ask if he could use the bathroom while you were asking for the rest of your students, not all of whom had access to spoken English, to line up? Would you use ASL? Spoken English? Would you consider written English? The goal of that interaction between teacher and student at that moment could help the teacher decide how to communicate. In the situation above, the teacher would need to

decide on the most appropriate language to use in response. If the student was fluent in ASL, then that could be the language of choice to avoid isolating the other students in the area who

did not have access to spoken English and to model inclusive language use. However, if the student did not have adequate ASL skills, then a good approach would be using spoken English, followed by an immediate ASL interpretation. That would expose the student to proper ASL through the translation from spoken English to ASL while also allowing the other students access to the interaction.



### Goal Setting for Various Situations

We applied this approach to each classroom interaction. Our first grade classroom of unique language learners faced challenges with ASL, spoken English, and code-switching on a daily basis. We faced each challenge with a clear question in mind: *What is the goal?* Several situations we experienced last year help illustrate our goal setting and decision making.

- Student in spoken English: "Michelle, what is Bobbie Jo's favorite color?"
- Michelle in spoken English: "Ask Bobbie Jo yourself."
- Student in spoken English: "But how do you sign it?"
- Michelle in ASL: "COLOR YOUR FAVORITE WHAT?"
- Student asks Bobbie Jo in ASL what her favorite color is.

In the above scenario, the goal was to help the student both learn ASL and get the information she needed. Since the student did not know enough ASL to ask Bobbie Jo herself, it was crucial that Michelle model appropriate language use without dismissing the student's need to communicate directly with Bobbie Jo.

*Students were given the assignment of presenting about an animal at the annual school Expo. In preparation, they went to the library to find books on their favorite animal. Charlie\* chose a book about walrus that was above his independent reading ability. He and the classmates in his group were not able to read the book with full comprehension. ASL was their primary language, and they all were still developing academic ASL skills.*



*Bobbie Jo chose to use ASL as the language for the students' initial experience with the book.*

Bobbie Jo's goal for this activity was for the students to understand the information about walrus in the book. With that goal in mind, she focused solely on the content in the book and reserved English language activities for a later date. By using the language that the students could best understand to introduce them to new information, the goal of the activity (to learn about walrus) was not diminished. The students were able to share detailed facts about walrus after the initial activity. After later activities related to the book, including English language activities, the students had gained enough content knowledge through ASL and their understanding of written English to write their own book about walrus. Throughout the experience, they also strengthened their academic ASL skills through the discussions they had.

- *In a social studies unit about safety, students were learning about why seat belts are important. Bobbie Jo's goal was for the students to understand the concept prior to reading or writing about it. For this*



*reason the students were first exposed to this concept through ASL as Bobbie Jo modeled language use regarding seat belts and engaged the students in role play. If the goal had been to develop spoken English skills in regards to seat belts, then Michelle would have taken the group and done the same activity ... in spoken English.*

- *Michelle taught grammar each day in language arts class. The class was composed of a mix of students who used ASL exclusively and students who used both spoken English and ASL. Michelle taught each lesson to the group in ASL. While students did seatwork after each lesson, Michelle went to each student and used his or her language of choice (spoken English or ASL) to review the content that had just been taught.*

Using ASL as the language of instruction ensured that all students were included in instruction. (When we had a student in our class who did not know ASL, we obtained an interpreter to translate it into spoken English for that student.) Spoken English was never the primary language of instruction in our classroom unless all the students present had full access to the information through that mode of communication; this avoided excluding some students from participating. We also did quick comprehension checks with each student on an individual basis after each lesson. Students who primarily used ASL benefited from the brief review of content and one-on-one attention. Students who primarily used spoken English also benefited from the content review and strengthened their spoken English skills through discussion of the new information.

*Guided reading was a daily part of the language arts curriculum. Michelle often found herself working with students on reading in either ASL or spoken English. One day while reading *The Manners of a Pig* by Bronwen Scarffe, she asked a student, "If the cow [a character in the book] was deaf, how would he ask for some food? Would he sign, 'I AM HUNGRY ... PLEASE GIVE ME SOME FOOD'?"*

A key component of our goal-setting approach was our focus on creating opportunities for all the students to think critically about the differences between written English and ASL. This emphasis on helping students consider how to say things in each mode is an important part of developing reading comprehension skills. We knew students understood the story when they were able to retell portions in their own words and in their preferred language without reciting the words in the book. Our work helping students to think about translations was also an important part of the process of helping our students to develop story retelling skills.



### Students' Contributions

Students of all ability levels have something valuable to contribute to the group. We found that our time together as a whole group was as beneficial as our instructional time in smaller groups. Providing students who use both ASL and spoken English with the opportunity to work collaboratively was crucial to achieving our goals. Every day we noticed ways students supported others' learning.

#### *I Will Teach You ASL*

Julia\* arrived at KDES in January and joined our class without any sign language skills. Initially she needed an interpreter to have full access to communication and instruction. One day Erinn\*, a native signer, brought an ASL dictionary to school. Without any of the teachers knowing, she took small moments during the day to show the pictures in the book to Julia. Julia has since learned to use ASL well and her positive early experiences with a native signer may have influenced her use of the language now.

#### *Reading and Writing are Fundamental*

Three students found themselves together in the classroom library frequently. One day we found them sitting around a picture dictionary. All three were looking at the words, writing them, and discussing their meaning. The student who had the strongest language skills was doing a lot of explaining to the other two students.

### Playing with Language

We don't always realize how funny the things we say can be, but students are certain to catch these little moments. In English, "You rock!" means that you are a totally awesome person. Say "YOU ROCK" in ASL, however, and it means that you are a rock. We often found the students and ourselves using language in ways that we all found funny. That was a positive development because it helped the students understand how to put words together. One example of playing with the two languages is: "I LIKE 'CLEAN' PIZZA." The ASL sign for PLAIN (a sign that indicates nothing is on the pizza) is the same sign as CLEAN, and students who knew that enjoyed catching the wordplay. We also guided students through the process of figuring out meaning from context by asking about other possible meanings for that same sign. In the above context, PLAIN would make more sense than CLEAN.

The impact of having fun with the two languages has lingered. One year later, we have students from that class walk up to us in the hallway and tell us in ASL, "YOU ROCK!"

### Challenges

Separating languages is crucial in an ASL/English bilingual classroom in order to provide students with strong language models in each language. The fact that we were dealing with a visual language and a spoken language (instead of two spoken languages) presented a new set of challenges, especially since we had students who were learning the languages concurrently. We found it easy to model both languages effectively when we were alone with students. However, we also encountered challenging situations, for example, when a student without



spoken language access walked into a spoken English group discussion. We had to ask ourselves: How do we meet all individual student needs without isolating any of the students? Should we code-switch mid-sentence? There were not many easy solutions, and we did not always deal with every situation perfectly.

One thing we had to decide early on was how to allocate instructional time for the use of each language, and the strategies we would use to keep the languages separate while still having students develop both languages. We experienced the most success using spoken English in small groups and then providing immediate interpretation of what was spoken to the other students and teachers in the classroom. This meant that we spent a great amount of time code-switching throughout our day. However, that approach paid off; our students ended the year with a great appreciation for both languages and both modes of English. They all developed a strong sense of their language needs and instinctively chose the language that would be the most useful to them in various situations.



A year has passed since we started this work. We look back and see that facing daily challenges with our primary question in mind, “What is the goal?”, and making decisions accordingly resulted in us walking away knowing that learning took place.

\* *The names of students have been changed to protect their privacy.*



# American Society for Deaf Children

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