

## Talk with your Hands: An Exploration of Communication through Sign Language

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The *GWRJ* has published many articles about translanguaging, but all of these are in reference to verbal languages. However, sign language interpretation is, in fact, a translanguaging experience. I am a member of Deaf Redbirds Association here on campus, and I was privileged to get to interpret in sign language with the association at the homecoming football game this year. The topic of translanguaging and genre with sign language interpretation is extremely important because when discussing these communication topics, sign language is typically overlooked. In this article, I relate this topic to terms such as multimodality, translanguaging writing, and CHAT. Though I am not proficient in ASL or any other type of sign language, I am engaging in this experience daily through the learning process. I hope that this article is informative to others and adds to the corpus of the Journal due to its unique take on a traditional topic.

### Research and Analysis

Communication, as a whole, is something I have always been passionate about. As a high school student, I was a member of a competitive speech and debate team where I was able to compete at the national tournament twice. I was also privileged enough to give a TEDx talk in October of 2018. I love public speaking. Because of this, I am now a coach for my high school's speech and debate team, and I have recently changed my college plans in order to pursue a degree in communication sciences and disorders so that I can better understand language and communication as a whole.

When many people think about the word *communication*, public speaking and conversation are often things that come to mind. What is interesting

about communication, however, is that it takes many forms. In fact, the word *communication* is defined by Merriam-Webster Dictionary as, “information communicated : information transmitted or conveyed” (“Communication”). This shows us that the sharing of information is the key factor when determining what we deem to be communication. It absolutely does not have to be verbal to be considered communication.

Learning sign language has been incredibly impactful in my life. As a member of Deaf Redbirds Association, I practice my skills once or twice a week. I hope to continue growing in these skills throughout my life. Sign language is a clear example of a transfer of information that does not take place by verbal means.

The connection may seem obvious, but I was surprised at how much an understanding of language and communication helped me in my efforts to learn American Sign Language (ASL). Upon entering college, cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) helped me think about sign language in a completely different way. The Illinois State Writing Program explains the purpose of cultural-historical activity theory by saying, “In our program, we use CHAT to help us think about and study the complex genres that we encounter in the world.” Through the terms associated with ISU’s CHAT, we can think more critically about the genre of sign language as well as communication as a whole. The Illinois State Writing Program describes a **genre** as “a kind of production that it is possible to identify by understanding the conventions or features that make that production recognizable.” Applying this definition, it becomes apparent that sign language is a genre and thus can be analyzed under CHAT. As we explore this form of nonverbal communication, we can better understand the communication events that take place in our everyday interactions.

This article is dedicated to members of the d/Deaf and hard-of-hearing communities as well as sign language interpreters and educators who engage in these communication activities every day. It is extremely important to write about sign language and sign language interpretation because these forms of communication are essential within our world and within our communities. This article is intended to shed light on these valuable methods of communication that are so often overlooked when communication is discussed within hearing communities. This article is also intended to inform and inspire hearing members of our society to learn more about the genres of sign language and sign language interpretation in order to further understand the role communication plays in their everyday lives.

## Exploring Sign Language

The summer after I graduated high school, I set out to do something I had always wanted to do: learn sign language. I wasn't sure how to start this process, so I reached out to a teacher from my high school who taught an ASL independent study during the school year. She was kind enough to let me use the textbook that she uses during the year. She told me I could borrow it for the whole summer as long as I gave it back by the start of the semester. I got to work right away. I tried to do a lesson per day, but that didn't end up working out long-term because each lesson took about an hour and a half. The lessons would consist of about twenty vocab terms to learn, some tricks to remember them, and then finally sentences made up of all the words I had learned.

Throughout the above, I demonstrated both the processes of **content research** and **primary research**. According to the Illinois State Writing Program, “*Content Research* is any kind of research a person (or group) might do to gain knowledge they plan to use in some kind of production.” My content research came primarily from watching videos on YouTube, reading articles online about the various forms of sign language, and reading the lessons in my textbook. Through these research techniques we can begin to understand communication on a more wholistic level.

While learning, the sentences in the book were the hardest part because in American Sign Language, the sentence syntax is different than that of spoken English. This was something about sign language that I had not known upon starting. As a result of this difference, the book would first “gloss” the sentences, prior to asking you to sign them. *Gloss* is defined in the journal *American Annals for the Deaf* as “written equivalents of ASL sentences” (Buisson 331). When analyzing this within the realm of CHAT, it becomes clear that glossing is a form of **translingual writing** or writing across languages.

When interpreting a song in American Sign Language, for example, it is important to gloss the song before attempting to sign it so you are aware of the correct order of signs and word translations. ASL is created for understanding and, as a result, eliminates many synonyms that are frequented in spoken English. Individuals with a lot of experience may be able to skip glossing as an intermediate step or gloss in their heads, but someone like me, who has not been signing for very long, should definitely engage in this translingual writing activity to ensure that their translation is as correct as possible. Likewise, for an individual who learned ASL as their first language, all writing with English syntax is, by definition, a translingual

activity. Because the syntax is different in ASL, reading or speaking in English would require an individual who learned ASL to get used to a different grammatical structure. This would be a translingual activity, because the individual is going between the grammar structures of the two languages.

I was struggling to fully grasp this new sentence syntax, so I decided to do some more research by reaching out to my good friend's mother, who is a sign language interpreter. In the article "The ESL Language Barrier: The Written Word vs. the Spoken Word" it states that primary research is "research you conduct on your own" (Abdelnour 56). The author goes on to demonstrate that this research is often interpersonal. By reaching out to my friend's mom, I was conducting primary research.

When doing this research, my friend's mom recommended a YouTuber to me. This YouTuber posts ASL lessons and has specific videos about sentence structure. I was also informed about another type of sign language called Pidgin Signed English or just Signed English. This dialect of sign language is also used in the United States. Signed English is not a distinct language like American Sign Language; it is a combination of English and ASL. The main distinguishing factor is that PSE uses a similar sentence structure to spoken English. My friend's mom told me that if I was just seeking to communicate, PSE might be an easier place to start. I decided, upon reflection, to continue working on learning the ASL sentence structure with the videos, but I was excited to learn more about both dialects.

I planned to attend Illinois State University in the fall but was disappointed to learn that I would not be able to take a formal ASL class because I am not a special education major. I was looking for ways to continue growing in my skills when I found an article online about a student at Illinois State who was advocating for the integration of ASL in the classroom. I reached out to him, and he was excited to talk to me about my quest to learn ASL. He recommended that I attend sign language practices that take place twice a week through Deaf Redbirds Association. This is an example of how **socialization** can pave the way for greater learning and understanding within research or when exploring a genre. The Illinois State Writing Program explains that, "socialization describes the interactions of people and institutions as they produce, distribute, and use texts. When people engage with texts, they are also (consciously and unconsciously) engaged in the practice of representing and transforming different kinds of social and cultural practices." Through socialization in the Deaf Redbirds Association, I was able to have the activities necessary to shape my knowledge of sign language.

When the school year started, I began going to Deaf Redbirds Association (DRA) practices in order to learn more. They asked all of us at the first meeting if we wanted to interpret for the homecoming football game. I was apprehensive because I didn't feel like I knew enough to interpret anything. This is an example of how **reception** depends heavily on the individual who is taking in the knowledge. The Illinois State Writing Program states that, "Reception deals with how a text is taken up and used by others." For me, when I received the knowledge that I could interpret, my reaction was nervousness, but others might be conflicted or excited.

My apprehension ended quickly, as they assured me that we would practice a lot and that I would be ready for the game. With that assurance, I signed up. Every week we would practice learning and signing the Illinois State Alma Mater, the fight song, the national anthem, and "God Bless America." All of these songs are played by the band during their pregame performance.

During the practices with Deaf Redbirds Association, we learned from a PowerPoint with the words to all of our songs written in both English and ASL Gloss. We practiced slowly at first, but eventually we were able to get to the point where we could practice with a recording of the marching band playing the songs. One of the hardest parts for me was remembering the gloss instead of the words that I had become so used to singing throughout my lifetime. In this struggle, I was experiencing the concept of a **low-road transfer**. D.N. Perkins and Gavriel Salomon explain this term in their article "Teaching for Transfer." They say that low-road transfer "reflects the automatic triggering of well-practiced routines in circumstances where there is considerable perceptual similarity to the original learning context" (5). In this experience, the spoken English grammar was triggered because it is a well-practiced routine. Because of this, it was difficult to retrain myself to think in terms of the gloss as opposed to the grammar structure I had become used to.

During the same timeframe, I continued doing a ton of primary research. Whenever I was unsure of a sign or the correct order of signs I would either ask a friend of mine or I would ask a member of the DRA board. Through my participation in Deaf Redbirds Association, I learned that there is even more to sign language than I had ever thought. I learned a lot of new signs from the songs we were interpreting. Additionally, I learned about SEE and cued speech, which are other forms of sign language that are used in the United States. I learned about these from members of the group who were learning about them in their sign language classes. Because I wanted to learn more, I decided to further my knowledge by doing some content research on

the topics. I found out a lot from this. I learned, in short, that SEE or Signed Exact English, is a system where every English word is given a sign and the structure can be directly taken from a spoken English sentence. This was interesting to me, but I was more intrigued by the research I did regarding cued speech. This is something that I was specifically fascinated with because I had heard through my primary research that cued speech is one of the ways d/Deaf individuals can learn how to speak verbally. As a future speech-language pathologist, this was something I really wanted to learn about. Through further content research, I learned that cued speech is based on phonetics and helps to supplement lip reading.

### The Multimodality of Sign Language

Over the next few months, I attempted to learn some cued speech from a chart I found online. I found it easier than learning American Sign Language because the signs and placements for cued speech represent the eleven sounds that are used to construct the English language. It doesn't take nearly as long to learn cued speech as it does to learn American Sign Language. Each sign in cued speech represents a sound. It is a completely phonetic form of sign language, so once you have memorized the signs and placements that represent each sound, it is all about speeding it up. This experience and form of speech is an example of **multimodality**. This is explained by the Illinois State Writing Program as, "ALL of the modes that humans can use to communicate." They include that this can include communication that is symbolic, oral, aural, visual, or alphabetic. Clearly, cued speech is a form of multimodal composing as it combines oral communication with visual communication. It, like other multimodal communication methods, allows for a more whole and complete understanding of the texts. Whether or not communication is related to sign language, an exploration of multimodality can help form deeper understanding of communication, as all text is communicated across a multitude of modes.

I was beyond excited to sign at the homecoming football game. We had two practices the week leading up to the performance. These practices were scheduled to make sure we knew the signs and were prepared for the game. On Friday night, we rehearsed again, but this time it was with Big Red Marching Machine, the marching band on campus. For this rehearsal, we stood on our yard lines and practiced the whole pregame along with the band, color guard, and dance team. It was really fun to see everything come together. We were able to truly appreciate what we had been working toward.

The next day was homecoming. It was a very cold and rainy day, but we were determined to make the best of it. The day started early with the homecoming parade which we were marching in. As we marched, we passed out candy and signed the fight song. After that, we went to the Department of Education's tailgate tent, where we had been invited. Then, we were invited to the President's tent to interpret the fight song for the people invited to that tailgate. It had already been a full day, but we still had one more thing to do: interpret at the football game.

Walking into the stadium, I was very nervous. This deals with my reception of this event. I didn't want to mess up and do a disservice to those who were counting on my interpretation to be correct, so my reception of this caused me to approach it very nervously. I knew, however, that because I was not the only interpreter, I would be okay. I was excited to go for it. Because of the rain, there were not very many people in the stands. This was upsetting, but as Big Red Marching Machine took the field, I was excited to sign on the field and have a good time. It ended up being a really fun experience. I successfully interpreted the pregame performance and had a great time doing it.

Afterward, I was soaking wet from the rain but happy that I had gotten the privilege of interpreting at the game. Within CHAT, **ecology** plays a large role in the context of the text as well as the shaping of the text itself. On this day, the actual weather played an important part in the outcome of the day. The rain caused there to be fewer people in the stands but allowed for an exciting day that no one was expecting and a day I will likely never forget.

I continue to learn and grow in my sign language skills every day, and I hope to continue growing my knowledge through the rest of my life. This is something that matters so much in our everyday world. I strongly believe that ASL ought to be integrated into public schools. It is something that everyone should have some knowledge of, even if that just means conversationally. Learning sign language opens us up to a greater understanding of communication in every aspect of our lives.

As I have demonstrated, this concept extends far beyond the English 101 classroom. Through becoming educated on sign language, we can learn so much about not only the English language but also about communication as a whole. Exploring sign language through PCHAT can help us to really understand the context through which we communicate, no matter the mode of communication. All language and texts are a part of a culture and have a very rich history. The exploration of this helps us to grow in our understanding of communication, no matter the uptake of the language.

In addition to this, my exploration of language allowed for the opportunity to conduct important content and primary research. The knowledge gained through these processes was essential in my quest to learn more about sign language as a whole. I was able to continue my learning process because of the knowledge I gained from conducting research. This, then, gave me a fuller and more complete understanding of communication, which will serve me well throughout my time in college and within my future career.

As human beings, we rely on communication on a daily basis. This is a concept that holds great significance regardless of time period, culture, or identity. It is something that connects us all. No matter how we communicate, we are bonded through our shared emphasis on communication. Because of the significance of this seemingly simple concept in our world, it is extremely important to explore the methods by which we communicate, so we can learn more about ourselves and the world around us. Through exploration of sign language, I sincerely hope that you have been impacted by the significance of the information presented and inspired to learn more about human communication as a whole. Learning and exploring sign language is a translanguaging activity. This movement between languages is essential for humans to communicate with each other. Communicating with other people is often taken for granted, but the exploration of translanguaging activity can help us to connect further. The process of communication is something that we must all continue to explore in order to connect with more of those around us every day.

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**Allie Beam** is a nineteen-year-old student who is working to inspire change within her community. Throughout her life, public speaking has always been of extreme importance. As a communication sciences and disorders major, she is preparing to work as a speech-language pathologist with the hopes of helping others find their voice. Beam's highest priority is working towards change within her community. Beam was one of four students asked to speak on behalf of University High School at the March for Our Lives. She used this opportunity to express the opinions of many students feeling unsafe in their schools after the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. Beam has since cofounded a group called BN Youth Activists and gave a TEDx talk in October of 2018 on the topic of youth activism. Through these actions, Beam aspires to speak out through her writing with the hopes of positively impacting the future.

