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Final Project Part 1: A Look at Sign Language

Throughout human history, languages have been established, evolved, and forgotten. However, what is it exactly that determines a language from being nonsense? According to the Merriam Webster Dictionary, language is, “a systematic means of communicating ideas or feelings by the use of conventionalized signs, sounds, gestures, or marks having understood meanings”. It is interesting to note that a couple of the qualifiers for language are conventionalized signs and gestures. It might then come to mind that sign language should be easily recognized as a foreign language, however; this is not always the case. In fact, sign language is often associated with misinformation that the general public has and thus prevents it from gaining the recognition it deserves. This can lead to some serious issues when it comes to interacting with possible clients who utilize sign language and can persuade people to not learn the incredible language and culture that Sign Language is able to provide insight on.

The focus that this project will be on American Sign Language specifically, but to first understand sign language we will first need to understand its origins. American Sign Language is actually split into two different sections: Old American Sign Language and its descendent American Sign Language. When Old American Sign Language existed there was no universal signing method, but rather each small community had their own unique signs. This changed in the 1800s when Dr. Gallaudet decided to go to Europe to learn different methods of teaching sign language. He eventually returned to set up the first school of the deaf in America which eventually became Gallaudet University. In American Sign Language there are three different versions that are the most common: Signing Exact English (SEE), Pidgin, and American Sign Language (ASL). Signing Exact English came out in the 70s and it was a movement that wanted people to sign exactly the way you would speak in English. This, however, was extremely unpopular, and tedious to do and was met with a lot resistance. Pidgin is the in-between of SEE and ASL. You have the same format as English, but you cut out all if the extra words. ASL on the other hand, has its own grammar and syntax. Currently, ASL is becoming more recognized as a foreign language in the United States, but its status varies from state to state.

There are many fields that interact with the deaf community. Some of these professions include: educators, people in the medical field, and speech pathologists. Educators often interact with a variety of students from all kinds of backgrounds. They will possibly have to work with children who have a problem with hearing and who communicate better through the signs. In fact, it is not that unlikely to have such a student one educator found that, “ASL is recognized as the language of the American deaf community and is the fourth most commonly used language in the United States and Canada” (Reagan 610). Being the fourth most commonly used language in the United States, it is surprising that it faces resistance as to being recognized as a language. People in the medical field also have to interact with patients and will often have to hire an interpreter to translate, since they are unable to understand what their patient is saying to them. Speech Pathologists and Audiologists also work closely with this populace in trying to help with their communication. This includes working with speech (reading lips and pronouncing phonemes correctly) and finding a device to improve their hearing (i.e. the cochlear implant). Finally, the deaf community is the largest advocate for discussions pertaining to ASL given that they are the ones who are the most affected.

American Sign Language has come an incredibly long way since its beginning, but it still faces a lot of opposition to being recognized. There are many factors for this (mainly misunderstandings on what ASL actually is), but despite this it is the fourth most utilized language in the United States. Many fields interact with the deaf community, but without proper training or understanding of the deaf culture they are limited in how much they can contribute to this culture. My project seeks to help educate university students through the promotion of the new ASL class that will be offered during the fall. In doing so, I hope to spread awareness and limit misunderstandings of this incredible language culture, so that way if those students meet someone in the future who signs they will be prepared to respectfully interact, understand, and if needed, help that individual.

Work Cited

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