American Sign Language at Longwood University

Introduction

English author and journalist, Geoffrey Willans once said, “you can never understand one language until you understand at least two” (20, 2012). When people learn a foreign language, it gives them an opportunity to not only explore another culture and way of life, but also explore their own language and culture in a new perspective. A foreign language can be defined as any “language not native to the speaker or to the country” (Definition). Most education systems offer foreign language classes in languages such as Spanish, French, German, and Latin. Recently, schools at every level have been considering other languages to offer and investigating the benefits of teaching nontraditional foreign language courses. Among these languages being contemplated is American Sign Language.

Longwood University currently offers classes in Spanish, French, and German that count towards foreign language credit. There are two levels of American Sign Language offered, but not accepted for the foreign language goal. There are specific objectives that the foreign language goal must meet. Longwood University currently believes that when a student completes a foreign language they will “demonstrate the ability to understand, interpret, and produce both oral and written communication in a foreign language”, “understand the relationships among the products, perspectives, and practices of the culture(s) studied”, and gain “insight into the nature of language and culture” (Edwards). Some argue that American Sign Language has not been recognized as a foreign language because it does not meet these requirements. However, when taking a deeper look into the language and culture of the Deaf community, one can see that it does fulfill these objectives. Longwood University should offer American Sign Language classes
as a foreign language credit because it is just as important for Longwood students, as citizen leaders, to understand the Deaf culture and language, as much as it is to understand the other foreign languages offered by the university.

History

Like all other languages, American Sign Language was established to bridge a gap in communication. In 1755, Abbe Charles Michel de l’Epee experienced this gap when he met two sisters that were deaf (Poor, 2003). He was living in Paris and looking to invite more people to church so they could hear the good news. After meeting these girls, he contemplated how he would be able to witness to them if they could not hear and did not understand French. This is when the idea of creating a language for the Deaf community was born.

American Sign Language was started by Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet with the help of Abbe Roch-Ambroise Sicard, who had studied sign language under the direction of Epee (Poor, 2003). Gallaudet also met a neighborhood girl that was deaf and wanted to find a way for her to connect with others through language. He decided to travel to Paris to study French Sign Language. This is where he met Sicard and became his mentee. After learning about the language and teaching styles, he brought his knowledge back to the United States and opened the American Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb in 1817. He combined what he learned from French Sign Language with the English language and created what is now known as American Sign Language.

American Sign Language allowed the Deaf community to better communicate and learn. The Deaf culture began to thrive, built stronger relationships and received a formal education, because they now had their own identity. However, this would soon be taken away in an event
Mariah Stump

that became known as Milan 1880 (Sturley). This was the year that the second International Congress on Education of the Deaf was held. Oralists, people that believed speaking was a better way of teaching and learning, felt sign language should no longer be used in the school systems. On September 11, 1880 the congress voted to have American Sign Language banned from the schools. All schools would now teach orally and teach the students to speak as well. This caused American Sign Language teachers to lose their jobs, the cost of education for the Deaf to rise, and an overwhelming decline in quality of education. Having their own unique language had given the Deaf community an identity and culture. After Milan, the quality of life of this tight community gradually declined.

It wasn’t until 1960, when William Stokoe published his book “Sign Language Structure”, that American Sign Language started to come out of the shadows. In his book, Stokoe discussed that sign language was its own language, complete with unique grammar, structure, and syntax (Sturley). Since then, it has grown in popularity and is now known to be the fourth most used language in America (Poor, 2003). State legislation has started to pass that American Sign Language is a foreign language (Gallaudet University, 2004). This allows schools to teach these classes as foreign language credit. Many high schools started to offer American Sign Language to fulfill the foreign language requirement. However, when students moved onto college level, they could not continue their education because the classes were not offered at that level. Universities and colleges started to explore the language and saw the value in teaching it at their institutions. Universities like Yale, Stanford, and the University of Pennsylvania are among those that have recognized American Sign Language as a foreign language (Wilcox). Local Virginia schools such as Virginia Tech, University of Virginia, and Liberty University also have programs. However, Longwood University has little history on the issue of considering ASL a
foreign language. Dr. Wade Edwards, Associate Professor of Modern Languages, stated that about one student a semester comes to his office to discuss this very topic for a paper, but many do not go very far. If hundreds of other universities have recognized the benefit of offering ASL as a foreign language, I feel it is worthwhile for Longwood to explore it as well.

Defining the Issue

Why should American Sign Language be considered a foreign language? A foreign language has been defined as not only a language not native to the country, but also a language not native to the speaker (Definition). When the word is broken down even more, foreign can be defined as “not natural; alien” (Foreign, 2013). According to the American Heritage Dictionary, a language is any “communication of thoughts and feelings through a system of arbitrary signals, such as voice sounds, gestures, or written symbols” (Language, 2013). In other words, a language does not have to be from another country in order to classify as foreign. ASL has already been proven to be a language by William Stokoe. This leaves the controversy of ASL being foreign. Although the English vocabulary would not be new to the students, the word order, grammar, and syntax would be very foreign. If these are both true, then why deprive Longwood students the ability to learn about this diverse culture and fascinating language?

Not offering ASL classes also affects prospective students. If ASL is offered at their school, high school students can take it as a foreign language credit. However, they could not continue this education if they chose to enroll at Longwood University. If continuing ASL at the college level is important to them, they may choose another college to attend. If they decide to still enroll at Longwood, they will be forced to take a new language for the foreign language requirement. One Longwood student commented, “I have taken sign language for 6 years and
when I came here I had to pick another language. I have never taken a spoken language and I'm struggling to learn a new language at 20. If Longwood had let me take what I had studied in high school I would have higher grades (Stump, 2014). Students may also have a reason to desire to learn ASL. They may have a relative or friend that is deaf that they would like to be able to communicate with. Some students may be interested in sign language because it opens up doors after college. For example, they may want to work in human services. Having a background in ASL could help them communicate and connect with people they encounter. Some students also find learning a new oral language very difficult, such as individuals with dyslexia. Adding the component of physically producing the words with ones hands also helps people learn better.

Not only does learning ASL meet the needs of students, but it also meets the needs of people that future Longwood graduates will encounter. ASL is now the 4th most used language in the United States (Poor, 2003). According to the United States Census of 2007, 19.7% of people spoke a language other than English while at home (Kominski, 2007). That being said, when that 19.7% left home, they knew English well enough to be able to communicate with native English speakers. This is not the case for individuals that are deaf. Unlike someone that speaks Spanish, you can not teach someone that is deaf to hear. This is only possible with hearing aids or cochlear implants, which are expensive and not always effective. It is possible to learn to read lips, but this is also not an effective way to communicate. Only about 30% of speech is visible on the lips (Berke, 2009). Therefore, in order to communicate with someone that is deaf, the hearing individual must either know sign language, or be patient. If Longwood offered ASL as a foreign language, Longwood students could help fill this communication gap.

Lastly, not offering American Sign Language as a foreign language credit is depriving the language and culture of its much needed recognition. It took close to a century for ASL and the
Mariah Stump

Deaf community to gain the respect that they deserve. American Sign Language was denied its effectiveness in the classroom and as a productive way of communication. The Deaf community was seen as having a disability, received inferior education, and was not accepted to have their own culture (Deaf). However, individuals in the Deaf community and advocates, such as William Stokoe, Princess Diana, and Gallaudet University, fought to ensure that it was recognized for the true culture and language it is (Sturley). Today, American Sign Language is studied by anthropologists, ethnographers, folklorists, and others that explore culture and languages (Wilcox, 1991). It wasn’t an easy task for the Deaf community to convince America to see them for the culture they are. It took dedication, many years, and much persuasion to get Americans to see ASL and being deaf through their eyes. Any culture that has to fight that hard to gain respect, deserves to be recognized and understood. Longwood University can give students the ability to learn about this motivated culture and unique language by offering classes in American Sign Language as a foreign language credit.

Stakeholders

There are four major stakeholders involved in the decision to make ASL a foreign language at Longwood University. However, there are two main stakeholders that greatly influence the possible future of ASL at Longwood. The first is the administration, specifically the Modern Languages department. As mentioned before, Longwood has written objectives that the foreign language requirement must meet. The administration argues that ASL is not a “foreign” language and lacks a written component. In order for the university to accept ASL as a general education class, it needs to be proven that the language does in fact meet these objectives. If the language is accepted, it will continue to affect the administration after the decision is made. Longwood would have to hire professors to teach the class and comprise a new
curriculum for the course. This point leads into the next stakeholder that would be influenced by Longwood recognizing ASL as a foreign language.

It is unsure if Longwood would be able to financially support ASL at the university. If Longwood were to offer ASL as a foreign language, they would have to provide four courses, ranging from elementary to advanced. There is currently one professor, Dr. Emmett Jones, that teaches ASL as a requirement for the Communication Sciences and Disorders major. However, there would be a need for a second professor in order to provide the four courses. In 2008, Longwood faculty in the Cook-Cole College of Arts and Sciences made a mean salary of $56,107 in a span of 10 months (Annual). Longwood would have to evaluate their budge to see if they can afford to hire new sign language professor and increase the pay of Dr. Jones.

Another group of individuals that will be affected is the student body. For years, Longwood students have questioned why ASL is not considered a foreign language at their university. In a survey, 92 out of 100 Longwood students believe that ASL should be considered a foreign language. One commented that “ASL is a completely separate language from English, with its own culture and phrases and grammatical structures” (Stump, 2014). If ASL was offered a Longwood, students would have the opportunity to learn about the diverse culture and language. Although, ASL can be taken as an elective, most students do not have room to fit it into their schedule. If ASL was part of the foreign language requirement, students could fulfill the goal and have the opportunity to learn a language that has always intrigued them.

If students were given the ability to learn ASL, they could have an effect on the last group of stakeholders, the Deaf community. As mentioned before, the Deaf community put in a lot of dedication in order to achieve the respect and recognition their culture deserves. They are
still fighting to reach others that may not have heard their story of triumph. Increasing the number of schools that teach ASL as a foreign language is another way that they can raise awareness of their culture. If Longwood University offered ASL, the school could influence future ASL advocates, interpreters, or even teachers. Most importantly, it would grow the number of people that truly understand the culture and language.

Responses

One large argument for why ASL is not offered at Longwood University is because it is seen as a second English language. It is true that there is a form of sign language that uses the English syntax and grammar. Signed Exact English is a visual form of the English language, complete with prefixes, suffixes, and the English word order (Wilt, 2007). Therefore, the grammar is the same, making it a visual English language. However, this is untrue for American Sign Language. There are multiple differences that set it apart from English. For example, English sentence structure, or syntax, mostly follows the Subject-Verb or Subject-Verb-Object format (Basic, 2010), while ASL uses the Topic-Comment format (American). Let’s take the sentence in English, “I washed my car last week”. In ASL it would be signed “My car, I wash week past”. The sentence structure and grammar of ASL resembles Japanese more than the English language (Nakamura, 2008). We can take this same sentence to discuss the word differences of English and ASL. In ASL, there can be multiple signs for one English word, called glossing (Thorn, 2014). For example, the sign for “wash a car” is different than to “wash a plate”. An individual must know the difference between these signs in order to avoid confusion. In ASL, there can also be one sign for multiple English words. The sign for “car” would be used to describe any automobile that is driven with a steering wheel, such as a truck, van, or bus. If the individual wanted to clarify the type of automobile, they would give the sign for “car”, and
then fingerspell the type of automobile, such as “jeep” (Miller, 2010). ASL is also different from English, because it does not have prefixes or suffixes. In the Deaf community, they do not have a sign for the endings –ed or –ing. Instead, they determine the tense by explaining when the action took place, such as “in the past”, “yesterday”, or “next week” (American). It can be seen that ASL grammar, syntax, word choice, and tense are very different from English. Therefore, it can be concluded that ASL is a complex language and not simply a second English language.

Longwood University also argues that ASL can not meet the writing component of the foreign language requirement. ASL, is in fact, not a written language, but a spoken or visual language. It was created to help a community be able to communicate, and this was best done through visual gestures and expressions. However, this should not exclude it from being considered a foreign language. Latin is not offered at Longwood, but it can be taken at another college and will transfer over as a foreign language credit. This language is full of rich history and beautiful culture. Yet, it is considered a “dead language” today and is only spoken by the Vatican of the Roman Catholic Church (Origin). Therefore, it can be said that it does not possess a spoken component and can not be used to communicate with another culture. Why then, will Longwood not accept ASL without a written component, but will accept Latin without a spoken component? Both of these languages are full of educational value and usefulness. Longwood should consider the benefits that both of these languages hold, and give students the chance to not only learn Latin, but ASL as well.

Although ASL is not a written language, an expressive component can be added to the course requirement to take the place of the written component. One of the unique traits of ASL is the importance of expression. A slight change in a facial expression can change the meaning of a sign. Dr. Thorn, Program Director of the American Sign Language Program at Liberty
Mariah Stump

University, explains this characteristic called mouth morphemes (Thorn, 2004). She used the example of the words “not yet” and “late”. The hand motions are the same, but for the sign “not yet” the tongue is placed on top of the bottom lip. This small movement changes the meaning of the sign and can cause confusion if not done correctly. To measure the students’ ability to properly express the ASL signs, students a Liberty University are required to videotape themselves signing. They are then graded on their expressive skills and ability to correctly sign the word or phrase. Students could also be assigned to create their own poem, story, or song and perform it for the class. This is very similar to other foreign language classes that require students to write a paragraph in their second language. Longwood would be able to meet the written component requirement if they replace it with an expressive component.

Another reason why this unique language is not offered at Longwood University is because it is not viewed as foreign. As mentioned before, a foreign language does not have to be from another country to be considered foreign. The state of Virginia recognizes it as foreign (Gallaudet University, 2004). Colleges and Universities are starting to see the educational benefits of the class and are now offering it as a foreign language credit (Wilcox, 2014). ASL is certainly foreign to native English speakers. The foreign language requirement is used to immerse students into a new culture and language, giving them a new perspective on other languages and their own. Does the language have to be from another geographically different country in order to fulfill this?

Longwood University also wonders if they have the money to provide an ASL program. However, after hearing some student feedback on the matter, Longwood can’t afford to not offer the program. It was made very clear that the students feel having ASL would be a great asset and that it is “unacceptable” that it is not already offered. One student commented on the educational
benefits, stating, “I would have much rather learned sign language because I feel that I would be able to apply it more in my future career rather than the other languages” (Stump, 2014). Students majoring in Human Services or Education would greatly benefit from learning ASL. The class is currently only offered to Communication Sciences and Disorders, but many students outside of the program try to get into the class because it applies to their field of study. Another student commented, “I don't feel it's fair to have to take it as a separate elective while also having to take a credit language”. Offering the class as a foreign language credit would allow these students to focus less on taking a foreign language because it is required, and focus more on taking a class to better their future careers. Another topic the students felt passionate about is Longwood’s treasured mission, to make the students into citizen leaders. However, not recognizing ASL as a foreign language deters students from fully doing this. One student stated, “Longwood praises how we are so diverse and how accessible we are for everyone, and yet we can’t get a simple credit change for the students to learn a language for someone with a hearing disability…why not let us truly embrace it and allow us to check off a goal and help the lives of people with a disability”. Another student commented that, “I think it is very important for students to have the ability to communicate with all people, not just the ones who communicate orally”. It is true that Longwood will have to slightly adjust their budget in order to accommodate for an ASL program, but the change would be worthwhile. It is clear that ASL is not only a language of interest at Longwood, but is also a language of necessity.

**Conclusion**

American Sign Language has come a long way since its beginning in 1960. It has to battle conspiracy against it and doubt of its educational benefits. However, it proved itself to be of communication and intellectual value to the Deaf community. Its diverse culture, unique
grammar style, and important visual aspect set it apart from any other language. This culture and language should not be ignored. Longwood University strives to make their students into citizen leaders. How can the students lead communities around them if they are not given the opportunity to truly understand them and acknowledge their importance? Longwood University needs to offer American Sign Language as a foreign language credit so students can reap the benefits of learning the language and gaining insight into the culture. Just as American Sign Language proved to be of educational value to the Deaf community, it can also be worthwhile for Longwood University students.
Works Cited


Mariah Stump


Thorn, D. N. (2014, March 20). Questions Regarding ASL. (M. Stump, Interviewer)

