

Hands-On Collection Building

A librarian offers tips for sign language materials selection

AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE (ASL) IS COMMONLY ASSERTED TO BE THE fourth most-used language in the United States, though a lack of hard statistics makes this statement difficult to prove. What is clear is that the number of hearing people interested in it has skyrocketed; 139 colleges and universities now recognize ASL as a foreign language in fulfillment of graduation

requirements, and according to a 2002 survey by the Modern Language Association, enrollment in ASL classes increased 433 percent between 1998 and 2002. Parents of hearing children are turning to sign books to help their babies and toddlers communicate before they have developed language skills. That adds up to a lot of interest in sign language, and not just in the deaf community.

But odds are, though your public library collection may contain materials in Spanish, Korean, and German, the sign language resources are minimal and dated, and the videos—if they are included at all—cover only basic vocabulary, with no real information about language and culture. And the odds are even greater that many of these materials would make anyone knowledgeable about ASL and Deaf culture cringe. Librarians struggle with selecting these materials without the background knowledge necessary to distinguish well-marketed but faulty books and videos from the lesser-known gems that may not be available from mainstream jobbers and most often have not been evaluated in review journals. Naturally, the best selector is someone who understands the particular requirements of visual-gestural languages and Deaf culture. No time for another degree? Here's a quick guide to get you started.

Before you can select materials effectively, you need to understand what sign language is and who uses it. You've seen the terms "sign language" and "American Sign Language," and you might have thought they were interchangeable. Wrong. "Sign language" is a generic term referring to all languages conveyed manually. "American Sign Language" is a complex language in its own right, with its own grammar, syntax, and cultural base of users. It differs from "sign language" in the same way that "Chinese" differs from "spoken language." American Sign Language is *not* universal; it is used primarily in the United States and Canada. Other sign languages exist all over the world, including British Sign

Language, Chinese Sign Language, and many more.

Perhaps many people believe in the universality of sign language because they do not understand the nature of visual-gestural communication. Though many signs are indeed iconic, which is to say they create a

picture or use a common gesture—for example, the sign for "drink" mimes the act of holding a cup to one's lips—many more signs are arbitrary. New learners often ask such questions as, "Why does that sign mean that concept? It doesn't seem related." This is the same as asking why the letters "c-a-t" mean "cat." They simply do.

A common misconception is that one can sign ASL and speak English at the same time; because the grammar and sentence structure of ASL differs considerably from that of English, this would be akin to trying to speak English while writing Spanish. Simultaneous signing and speech is only possible if one is using signed English.

Sign languages express meaning in ways very different from spoken languages. Spoken languages are linear, and therefore conducive to writing; sign languages are three-dimensional, and one sign can express many concepts at once. For example, the English sentence, "I went to the library" can be expressed in two signs in ASL, with the pronoun, action, and directional information incorporated into one sign. Facial grammar is also very important in ASL; the position of one's eyebrows, for example, can make all the difference between a statement, a question, a negation, or a command. Though ASL is a manual language, its production requires far more than just the hands.

The mass media would lead us to believe that all deaf people can lip-read, or, more accurately, speech-read—a process that involves a great deal more than just looking at the speaker's lips. The number of skilled speech-readers is in fact relatively low.

The true surprises for many hearing people come when learning about Deaf culture, starting with the fact that there is even such a thing. Every deaf person is different, of course; some prefer to be called hard of hearing or hearing impaired. The generally preferred term, however, is "deaf"; members of Deaf culture are fiercely

proud of ASL, and resent terms such as "hearing impaired," which imply a disability where they see only a difference. The differences in language mean that Deaf culture also has its own etiquette and rules, many of which are surprising to outsiders.

Use the guidelines below to evaluate current materials or items you are considering for purchase.

•**What is the visual quality?** In sign language, this is far more important than the text. If it is an instructional book or video, are the depictions of the signs clear and easy to follow? Because ASL is a dynamic language, simple line drawings can be confusing. The current trend toward photographic illustrations holds real promise in this area.

•**What are the credentials of the authors or producers?** Were deaf people or skilled signers involved in the production? Lack of input from deaf people usually leads to reinforcement of misperceptions and faulty information.

•**Does the book or video place the language in an appropriate context for its audience?** Lack of reference to deaf people or Deaf culture is the most common flaw in sign language materials available on the mass market, and is akin to a French language book that never mentions a country called France. Most disturbing is the rise of baby sign books that often co-opt ASL without respecting or acknowledging the culture behind it. Depending on the focus, context may not require a great deal: for a baby sign video, it could mean an informative segment for parents; for a video geared to younger elementary students, a brief introduction to deafness.

•**Is the information current?** Does the material use outdated terms such as "deaf and dumb" or "Ameslan" (a term for ASL used in the 1970s and '80s)?

•**Does the material acknowledge the wide variety among deaf people and users of sign language?** Beware of generalizations.

•**Does the book or video state clearly whether it is depicting ASL or Signed English?** It may be perfectly appropriate to purchase some Signed English materials, depending on your clientele, but these materials should be clearly marked as such to avoid confusion. Failure to specify often results from a lack of input from deaf people in the production process, and may reflect misconceptions on the part of the producers.

•**Is the content appropriate to the audience?** Are language and cultural information clear without oversimplifying? Many books and videos simply offer laundry lists of vocabulary without any instruction for putting the signs together, or any hint that ASL requires more than simply signing every word as you speak it. Avoid them.

•**For videos: Is the program accessible?** Do the signed portions have captions and/or voice-overs? Are all unsigned portions captioned? A surprising number of recent videos, particularly those designed for small children, have failed this test, rendering them inaccessible to deaf parents who want to use them with their

deaf or hearing children. It may be entirely appropriate to the needs of your library to purchase uncaptioned videos in ASL that do not have voice-overs. However, if a sign language video is not accessible to a deaf audience, something is wrong.

•**What is the technical quality?** Though videos must be clear and well lit, and books must illustrate signs clearly, flashy technical quality is actually a lesser consideration, especially with videos. The fact is that some of the best productions out there are low-budget affairs made by smaller companies that lack the resources for special effects and fancy advertising. Give more weight to consideration of content; as long as the book or video gets the information across clearly, then showy visuals are unnecessary and may even be distracting.

Resources are available to help you find the best sign language materials for your library's needs. Many review journals do cover these materials, though their scope may be limited to mainstream publishers and video producers. Sometimes finding the hidden gems requires a bit of research.

The Laurent Clerc National Deaf Education Center offers many valuable resources on deafness and sign language, among them a list of best sign language books for young readers: clerccenter.gallaudet.edu/InfoToGo/503.html. For videos, we are fortunate to have the excellent ASL Access, a nonprofit organization that has put together a collection of more than 200 recommended ASL videos. ASL Access works with knowledgeable evaluators

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to create and maintain the collection, and there is no charge for its services in ordering and shipping the videos, or for the custom publicity flyers and guidebooks it provides. The ASL Access Collection is an ideal purchase for a library committed to increasing its sign language materials, and can often be funded by grants.

ASL Access also provides an unbeatable resource for *all* librarians with its comprehensive Web site at www.aslaccess.org, which offers video reviews by evaluators well versed in ASL and Deaf culture. Because of the relationship it has created with distributors of sign language videos, ASL Access is able to offer reviews of materials that may never find their way into major review journals, as well as mainstream productions. The Web site also offers a comprehensive listing of video distributors and publishers of sign language books, with detailed contact information.

Kathleen MacMillan is the Library Media Specialist at the Maryland School for the Deaf in Columbia. An annotated list of recommended books and videos appears with the online version with this article.