USING COMPONENTS OF AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE TO BETTER THE QUALITY OF LIFE AND COMMUNICATION ACCESS OF ELDERLY PERSONS IN ASSISTED LIVING

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USING COMPONENTS OF AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE TO BETTER THE QUALITY OF LIFE AND COMMUNICATION ACCESS OF ELDERLY PERSONS IN ASSISTED LIVING

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A thesis submitted to the University Honors Program in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Honors Certificate with Thesis

Approved by
Pamela Walker

Southern Illinois University, Carbondale
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Abstract

One of the most common conditions that affects people as they get older is presbycusis, the gradual loss of hearing (“Age-Related Hearing Loss”). Because of this, components of American Sign Language (ASL) were taught to elderly persons at Stillwater Senior Living assisted living facility in Edwardsville, IL with the purpose of improving access to communication. Helpful words to know in assisted living such as “want, food, hurt, and better” were taught. In addition, students were taught to feel comfortable with gestures such as pointing or thumbs up as a way to communicate. After learning how to sign certain words, students were taught how to form these terms into phrases that could be used everyday. For example, using the words “water” and “want” to form the sentence “I want water.” A Google Slides presentation was created for each class, as well as paper handouts that students could refer to later. The first handout included every letter of the alphabet so that students could practice signing their name outside of class. The second worksheet, given at the last class, had pictures for how to sign some of the most important words learned throughout the class. By the final class, students had formed a strong interest in learning sign language and were able to form beginner sentences as well as introduce themselves in sign language. Students were excited to learn more signs and practice signing with each other even after the class was over.
Introduction

The purpose of this research is to use components of American Sign Language in a format teachable to elderly persons in assisted living with the intent of removing communication barriers and creating a better quality of life for these people. The idea for this research came from visiting my grandmother at her assisted living facility. She currently wears hearing aids; however, often the batteries die, she cannot figure out how to work them, or they just are not strong enough for her. On one visit, I ended up communicating with my grandmother by writing on pen and paper and passing it back and forth. This limited access to communication has made my grandmother very quiet and not very social. I wanted to use components of sign language to be able to help elderly persons so that if their hearing starts to go they are still able to communicate with their family and friends.

Questions to be answered in this study are:

1. Are elderly persons in assisted living interested and willing to learn ASL and other gestures to communicate?

2. How much will students be able to learn? Are there any inhibitors of learning? (For example, having arthritis in one hand).

3. Will signs learned be retained after one day? After two days?

4. Will this experience overall make a positive impact and improve the quality of life for elderly persons?
Age-related hearing loss, also called presbycusis, is defined as “the loss of hearing that gradually occurs in most of us as we grow older,” and “...one of the most common conditions affecting older and elderly adults” (“Age-Related Hearing Loss”). Around one in three people in the United States between the ages of 65 and 74 experience age-related hearing loss (“Age-Related Hearing Loss”). Hearing loss can be attributed to age, medical conditions such as high blood pressure or diabetes, as well as long-term exposure to loud or long-lasting noises (“Age-Related Hearing Loss”). Although there are ways to prevent noise-induced hearing loss, there is no way to prevent age-related hearing loss. Not being able to hear can make it difficult to communicate with family and friends, and the lack of communication can often lead to feelings of isolation (“Age-Related Hearing Loss”).

“The Alzheimer’s Foundation of America champions ‘brain fitness’ as an important part of Alzheimer’s prevention” (Drell). This ‘brain fitness’ can be achieved through classes and language learning. Studies have been conducted on the effects of bilingualism on diseases such as dementia and alzheimer's (Sandoiu). In one study, out of 450 people that had been diagnosed with Alzheimer’s, one half were bilingual and the other half was monolingual (Moskowitz). “While all the patients had similar levels of cognitive impairment, the researchers found that those who were bilingual had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's about four years later, on average, than those who spoke just one language” (Moskowitz).

In another study, 14 French speaking participants were taught English as a second language over a four month period (Ware, et al.). Although participants found the classes to be
“stimulating and enjoyable,” students were not interested in serious learning because of the lack of needing to use English in order to communicate with friends or family (Ware, et al.).

When teaching ASL as a second language, there are more benefits than just brain stimulation. In a senior wellness center in Washington, a sign language class is taught weekly (Drell). One student mentions that her purpose for her and her husband learning sign language is because their hearing is not as good as it used to be. “A visual communication technique, like ASL, will help them communicate as their hearing deteriorates” (Drell).
Methodology

The setting for this study was Stillwater Senior Living assisted living facility in Edwardsville, IL. After contacting the events coordinator at the facility the class was approved and dates were put on the events calendar. In addition, a flyer was submitted and used throughout the building. *See Appendices #1 for flyer.* The title of the class was “Non-Verbal Communication.” This title was chosen because although ASL would be taught, it is important to respect that not all aspects of ASL grammar would be taught and there is a lot more to the language than the alphabet and signs. Because of this, a more accurate way to define the class is by calling it “Non-Verbal Communication.”

The study was conducted over the course of one week. The room used for the study was by the front office and dining room. It had couches centered around a TV screen where the slide show was displayed. Before each class, employees encouraged residents to attend. Below is a schedule of the plans for each day:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Monday</th>
<th>Tuesday</th>
<th>Wednesday</th>
<th>Thursday</th>
<th>Friday</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Meet with residents to inform them of the class and what they will learn by attending.</td>
<td>Class 1: Intro to American Sign Language and non-verbal communication.</td>
<td>Class 2: Gauge how much was remembered from the previous day, introduce more signs and alphabet sheet.</td>
<td>Break day</td>
<td>Class 3: Review all that was learned, study how much was remembered. Go over all signs with second handout and practice signing names.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Note: At least one of my family members attended each class to record videos and take pictures.

**Monday - Introduction**

On Monday, I was able to introduce myself to residents and become familiar with some of the potential students for the class. This also helped me identify about how many people I could expect at the classes and the level of interest people had in coming. It was also an opportunity to meet the events coordinator in person (previous communication had been via phone and email) and assure that all technology could be properly connected to the TV screen in the room where the class would be.

**Tuesday - Class One**

*Eight students attended.*

Tuesday was Non-Verbal Communication Class One. In the first class, a slideshow was used to introduce what the class was about and what would be covered. *See Appendices #2 for slideshow.* It is important to note the slides have large fonts so that students would be able to see words as they were being taught in case they had a hard time hearing. Topics covered in the first class included non-manual signals and the use of basic gestures to get a message across. Non-manual signals include using facial expressions as a way to convey meaning. It was important to teach that it is ok to communicate by thumbs up or thumbs down, nodding or shaking your head, and pointing. It is often taught that pointing is rude, so people tend to avoid
Part of the lesson was teaching about “the power of the point” and how it is not rude and it is a
great way to discuss places and people. ASL signs taught on the first day were:

- Like and do not like
- Want and do not want
- Friend
- Bathroom
- Food/eat
- Drink
- Water
- Coffee
- Hurt
- Better

Signs learned were reinforced through creating sentences that applied to the students’
lives, such as “Who is your friend?,” “Where is the bathroom?,” and “I want to go eat.” Like and
do not like signs were reinforced through showing pictures of items and having the student show
if they liked or did not like an object. It was important to remind students that even if they do
not remember to ASL sign for like and do not like, that they can still convey their feelings
through non-manual signals and thumbs up/thumbs down. Residents were communicative and
engaged throughout the class, asking questions about how to sign certain things and for repeating
signs when necessary.

Additional notes:
Students did signs along with me and asked questions to make sure they were making the signs correctly.

Students showed interest in ASL more than I had anticipated.

*Photos from Class One can be found in Appendices #3.*

**Wednesday - Class Two**

_Six students attended._

In class two, a slideshow was used with the addition of a handout later on. See Appendices #4 for slideshow and #5 for handout. The first part of class was used to review signs from the day before and see how much was remembered over the course of one day. Going through each sign, as well as reinforcing how a sign can be used to make a sentence, was done for review. The majority of students remembered more than half of the signs presented and did them along with me as we reviewed. For class two, I originally planned for less signs to be introduced:

- Yes
- No
- Thanksgiving (shown two different ways)

The reasons for introducing less signs were:

1. To not overwhelm the students with too many signs. Being able to sign their name was already going to be taught, which involves a sign for each letter.
2. To help with reinforcing the signs/non-manual signals from Class One.
However, due to the fact that the majority of students had remembered most of the signs from Class One and were eager to learn more, phrases such as Merry Christmas and introducing yourself were also taught. In addition to these signs, students picked up how to sign their name quite quickly with the help of referring to the handout. Students requested a handout at the next class as well so that they would be able to practice on their own.

Additional notes:

- One student had brought their ASL book that they already had to show me what they learned before. See Appendices #6 for photo.
- Students impressed me with what they remembered from the first day. Even if they did not remember, they knew other ways to get their point across with other gestures.
- Students were eager to learn more than what was planned, and were picking things up quickly.
- My mom was able to bring my grandma to this class. Although she sat in the back, she was able to do some signs along with the class.

See Appendices #7 for photos from Class Two.

Friday - Class Three

Four students attended.

The final class occurred after a day of no class to study how much was remembered after a break. Class three started with a review of phrases and sentences formed from the slideshow. See
Appendices #8 for slideshow. Students were able to do signs along with me and remembered non-manual signals and facial expressions to get their point across even if they forget the technical sign for something. For example, using thumbs up and thumbs down in place of the sign for like and do not like.

After this quick review, a handout was given to everyone (See Appendices #6). I created this with the most important signs we had learned so that students would be able to practice. One student even brought pencils to make notes on her sheet for practicing later. As a class, we went through the terms on the handout twice. Students asked questions along the way whenever they needed clarification. Words included in this handout were:

- Friend
- Family
- “I love you”
- Hurt
- Yes
- No
- Eat
- Bacon
- Coffee
- Water
- Tea
After this, we reviewed introducing each other. For this, we went around the room and introduced each person together. This started with the person signing “My name,” while the rest of the room would sign “His/Her name.” Next, everyone would use the alphabet to sign that person’s name. A lot of students brought back their sheet from Class Two to help them with this. One student impressed the rest of the class, myself included, with how fast she was able to sign her name. She said she had been practicing it a lot.

At the end of the final class I thanked the students for coming. The students at the final class were the most dedicated, and were very thankful to have gotten to learn about sign language. Students talked about how they would hang up the handouts in their apartment and keep practicing. In addition, they said they could practice their food terms at meals together.

Additional notes:

- After the class had ended, one resident came up to me and thanked me again. She told me that her friend (the woman who was able to sign her name quickly) had just been diagnosed as deaf. They were both thankful for this class and excited to be able to learn sign language and continue practicing it.
- My grandmother came, and with the help of my mom, was more engaged and able to do some signs along with the class.

*Photos from Class Three can be found in Appendices #10.*
Results and Conclusion

At the end of the three classes, students had a grasp on basic signs as well as how to sign their own name. Initially, my plan had been to just teach enough basic signs that would be able to help with everyday life in the assisted living facility. For example, being able to say that you want food or water, or are in pain somewhere. However, because the students were able to pick things up quicker than expected, they were taught the alphabet and how to sign their name as well. Referring back to the initial research questions:

1. Are elderly persons in assisted living interested and willing to learn ASL and other gestures to communicate?

Yes, the students that came to the class showed a strong interest in the subject:

- Students were not afraid to ask questions to make sure they were making the sign correctly.
- Students asked about how to sign additional things that weren’t on the slides, such as “bacon,” “tea,” and “Merry Christmas.”
- One student brought their ASL book to show me what they had learned before while studying sign language.
- One student brought materials to take additional notes on how to make certain signs.

2. How much will students be able to learn? Are there any inhibitors of learning? (For example, having arthritis in one hand).
Students were able to learn more than originally anticipated. As mentioned before, students asked how to sign additional things that were not on the slideshows. Students also learned how to introduce themselves and sign their names, which was not originally planned for the classes. There were some inhibitors of learning. Some students’ hearing was not great, but having the slideshows in large print as well as being clear and loud when teaching helped with this. In addition, one student had arthritis in their dominant hand. To solve this, it was important to encourage the student that their sign was still clear enough to understand.

3. Will signs learned be retained after one day? After two days?

One day:

- Over half of the signs were retained when reviewed during Class Two. Because of this quick acquisition, more signs than originally planned were taught during Class Two.

Two days:

- Again, a majority of the signs was remembered when reviewing at the beginning of class. Even if the technical sign was not remembered, students were able to use other ways to get their point across. For example, with facial expressions or using thumbs up/thumbs down.

4. Will this experience overall make a positive impact and improve the quality of life for elderly persons?
Overall, this class was a success and made a positive impact on the assisted living residents that attended. The students that came were engaged and interested in the subject and were eager to practice and apply what they learned outside of class. It meant a lot that one of the students was also thankful because her friend, another student, had recently been diagnosed as deaf. This was also special for me because my grandmother was able to come to the second and third class and was more engaged and able to do some of the signs with the help of my mom.

Limitations

Some limitations of this study are:

1. There were only so many students, and only three were there for every class. This was mostly due to the fact that it was during Thanksgiving week, so many had family visiting. Because of this, there were fewer students as the week went on and got closer to Thanksgiving. It would be better to conduct any future studies during a calmer week.

2. Being able to do quizzes and tests students in a more formal study would lead to more definitive results of certain signs being retained. Because this was a class with the main goal of improving quality of life and encouraging the use of signs/non-manual signals, tests were not given.
3. This study was conducted at one facility over the course of one week. It would interesting to teach multiple classes for longer periods of time at different facilities to have a larger sample for data.

Implications

This study shows that teaching components of ASL to people in assisted living facilities is something that can improve the quality of life for elderly persons in two ways. First, learning signals can help by improving access to communication between each other. Students were able to remember signs and form sentences by the end of the third class. Second, students were excited to learn signs and had fun during the classes. Even if students did not get something right or forgot a sign, there was not any discouragement or wanting to quit. Students were very thankful at the end of the course and were happy with their experience.

Personally, this experience has made me want to return and teach classes as volunteer work in the future. It has been a rewarding experience to see the students exceed my expectations of the class.
Appendices

1. Flyer created for Non-Verbal Communication Class:

Non-Verbal Communication Class

Learn basic signs to help communicate with each other!

Friends and family encouraged to attend!

Class Dates:
Tuesday, November 26 at 4:00 p.m.

Wednesday, November 27 at 4:00 p.m.

Friday, November 29 at 2:00 p.m.
2. Slides from Class One:

**Non-Verbal Communication**

Class One

*What is this class?*
- A way to improve daily life by communicating quicker and easier
- Using some components of sign language, but mostly non-verbal communication skills that we already know

*What is nonverbal communication?*
- Using parts of your body (instead of your voice) to make connections with people
- Does not involve talking or hearing
- Nonverbal communication is through seeing

*How do we show we like or don't like something?*
- With Thumbs up/down
- With Nodding, shaking your head
- With Facial Expressions
  - Happy
  - Sad
  - Disgust

*Using parts of sign language*
- Like
- Do not like

**Like or don't like?**

*The power of pointing!*
- To show location
- To explain what you're talking about (Example: talking about a TV show and pointing to the TV)
- To point out a person
- Raised to think pointing is rude, but really, it's helpful

*Pointing Practice*
- "Who is your friend?"
- "Where is the bathroom?"
- "I want to go eat."
3. Photos from Class One:
4. Slides from Class Two:

- **Non-Verbal Communication**
  - Class Two

- **Sign Review**
  - Ways to show like / don't like
    - ASL sign for like / don't like
    - Thumbs up / down
    - Facial Expressions
  - Want and don't want
  - The power of pointing

- **Sign Review**
  - Eat
  - Drink
  - Water
  - Coffee
  - Hurt
  - Better
  - I love you

- **New Signs**
  - Yes
  - No
  - Thanksgiving
    - Thank you version
    - Gobble version

- **Signing your name!**
5. Alphabet Handout (Downloaded from TeachersPayTeachers.com) used for signing names in Class Two:
6. Photo of Book student brought to show:

![Image of book cover](image_url)

7. Photos from Class Two:

![Image of class activity](image_url)
USING COMPONENTS OF AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE TO BETTER THE QUALITY OF LIFE AND COMMUNICATION ACCESS OF ELDERLY PERSONS IN ASSISTED LIVING
8. Slides from Class Three:

- **Non-Verbal Communication**
  - Class Three

- **Review of Signs from sheet**
  - Sentence Practice with:
    - Like, don't like
    - Want, don't want
  - Other signs:
    - Thank you
    - Better

- **Name Practice and Alphabet**
  - "My name is..."

- **Thank you!**
9. Sign Review Handout from Class Three:

**ASL Class Practice Sheet**

**Friend**

**Family**

**I love you**

**Hurt**

**Eat**

**Bacon**

**Coffee**

**Water**

**Tea**

**yes**

**no**
10. Photos from Class Three:
Acknowledgments

I would first like to thank my grandmother, Aurelia Nickrent, for inspiring me to create this research. After visiting with her one day and having my mom and I communicate with her via writing back and forth, I figured there had to be a better option. I knew my grandma was not the only person who’s hearing aid would break or have the battery die. As people get older, it is natural for their hearing to fade. I wanted to help people learn components of sign language so that they would be able to still communicate with their families and friends as they got older.

I would next like to thank Stillwater Senior Living for their cooperation and allowing me to teach classes to their residents. In addition, I would like to thank Nancy, Carol, and Craig for their dedication to the class and learning sign language.

Members of my family were a great help at the classes, and I appreciate their moral support as well as their taking pictures and videos for the study. I am especially thankful to my mom for bringing my grandma to the class and assisting her throughout it. It meant a lot to have my grandma there since she was the one who inspired me to do this.

None of this would have been possible if Pam Walker, my faculty advisor, were not there to advise me on the class and encourage me. Pam has been an amazing teacher throughout my four semesters in ASL, and is a faculty member that has made a positive impact on my experience at SIU.

Finally, I would like to thank the University Honors Program for allowing me to pursue this research and encouraging me to be successful.
Biographical Note

I am a current senior at Southern Illinois University Carbondale (SIU) graduating in May with a dual degree. I will have a BS in Advertising with a minor in Marketing and a BA in Spanish with a minor in ASL. I have a love for languages and started taking ASL classes my sophomore year. I was initiated into ASL Honors Society my junior year.

In addition, I have been involved with the Saluki Ambassadors organization since my freshman year, and was elected president for the 2019 term. I have been a Resident Assistant for University Housing my junior and senior year.

In the future, I hope to have a career that involves languages and business. I have really enjoyed this experience teaching the class at Stillwater and I plan to continue teaching the Non-Verbal Communication classes as volunteer work.
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*Note:* Images used in creating handout, *see Appendices #9*, were downloaded from Google Search Image results.