

BOOK REVIEW

Improving ASL Pedagogy

Rosen, R. (2015). *Learning American Sign Language in High School*. Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press. Hardback. 160 pages. \$55.00.

Student enrollment in ASL classes at college and universities in the United States has rocketed in the last 15 years (Welles, 2004), a well-publicized finding that sets the context for the research project described in this volume. Author Russell Rosen points out that increases in ASL enrollment have been similarly dramatic at the high school level, with the number of high schools offering ASL classes doubling in the last 10 years. In this volume, Rosen studies ASL learners at five high schools in and around New York City, two of which serve students diagnosed with learning disabilities. Using survey data, he explores the effects of learning disability, motivation, and learning strategies on course grades, with the goal of developing pedagogical practices that improve performance of high school ASL learners.

Chapter 1 provides background about the fight to establish ASL as a foreign language in various states in the United States. Chapter 2 introduces the main study, based on a questionnaire Rosen sent to ASL learners at five New York high schools, two of which serve students with disabilities. The 52-item questionnaire collected information about student demographics, their motivations for taking ASL, their preferred practice for remembering new signs ("perceptual processing"), and their strategies for learning ASL in general. ASL instructors also submitted information on student grades. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 present in-depth analysis of questionnaire answers related to motivation for learning ASL, strategies for learning ASL, and predictors for learner achievement, respectively. Each of those chapters includes a summary of findings from the spoken L2 literature and detailed analysis of responses for the relevant questionnaire items. Chapter 6 summarizes study findings and offers specific pedagogical suggestions for ASL instructors.

Rosen's statistical analysis of the questionnaire data examines interactions between every possible combination of factors, yielding a great number of very specific findings, some of which are intuitively logical. For instance, among general education learners, being motivated to learn ASL due to a belief that it is an easy language to learn, plus reliance on English translations to remember new signs, correlates with a preference for both ASL and English in the classroom. Similarly, students in higher level

courses were more likely to use pictures and images to remember new signs than students at lower levels, who favored English translations. Taken together, such findings suggest that as learners progress, they begin to map new ASL signs directly onto the concepts they represent, rather than relying on an English intermediary. Other patterns are more difficult to interpret, such as the finding that motivation to learn ASL because of its uniqueness, plus reliance on English translations to remember new signs, correlates with a preference for dialogue exercises, while not being motivated by a desire to teach ASL correlates with a preference for using textbooks to learn the language. Many of the reported correlations are weak at best, and in some cases, Rosen skips analyses that could have been interesting. For example, most respondents with learning disabilities attended a high school that limits their options for second language to ASL only. Rosen concludes that this lack of L2 choice for students with disabilities "render[s] learner motivation irrelevant" (p. 37). However, being restricted to ASL as one's only L2 option does not preclude students who choose to enroll in ASL class from having varied motivations for doing so, just like their general education counterparts.

Rosen concedes that his small sample size and dependence on self-reported data limit the generalizability of his study findings. Nevertheless, the timeliness of his study is unquestionable. As the number of ASL classes increases, so does our need to understand how factors like motivation, learning strategies, and learning disability affect learner success, and how these patterns compare with those from spoken L2 classrooms. Rosen's study opens what I hope will be a long and lively discussion of these questions by many researchers.

Reference

- Welles, E. B. (2004). Foreign language enrollments in United States institutions of higher education, Fall 2002. *Profession*, 128–153.

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