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## ASL BILINGUAL BICULTURAL EDUCATION

### Introduction

Since the publication of this article in the first edition of the *Encyclopedia of Language and Education*, the title has been intentionally changed from *Deaf Bilingual Bicultural Education* to *ASL Bilingual Bicultural Education* for four compelling reasons.

1. Emphasis ought not to be on being Deaf as it most often solicits a medical/audist view of Deaf children as “audiologically handicapped” regardless of the intentions of the authors. Instead we offer a cultural linguistic perspective of a minority linguistic group deserving of Sign Language as their birthright.
2. We cannot suppose to make recommendations regarding the education of children who use Langue des Signes de Québec (LSQ) or other sign languages across Canada or elsewhere as we do not operate in these communities or education systems. Thus, our focus is on ASL bilingual bicultural education in the Ontario context. It is worth noting, however, that both ASL and LSQ are recognized languages in Canada, the country of both authors of this article. The LSQ community and educators will determine their own language planning needs.
3. In *Deaf bilingual education* discussions, emphasis tends to be placed on majority language development, namely, English. We intend to focus on the neglected minority language development of bilingual children, in other words on the development of their ASL proficiency.
4. While both *bilingual* and *bicultural* have been maintained in the title, the authors recognize that culture is inherent in language. As such, it can be argued that culture need not be delineated as a separate entity each time ASL is mentioned in the article as it is inherent in the language (Bahan, 2002).

This article outlines how language planning impacts ASL bilingual bicultural education. To do so we focus on early developments, major contributions and progress in academic institutions and in the community that have positive future educational ramifications. We also examine the constraints that have significantly limited progress. We provide recommendations for future directions in breaking through the language planning status quo for ASL bilingual bicultural education.

All educators must believe that they “wish only what is best for ASL children”. With that assumption, we are immediately reminded of an African story. It tells about a group of monkeys swinging up in branches overlooking a river in the midst of the jungle. They see a storm brewing

and the fish being tossed about in the river below as its current grows swifter and waves grow large. The monkeys, concerned for the welfare of the fish, quickly swoop down and scoop up as many fish as they can and rest them safely on the dry shore at the edge of the river (Rose, 1992). We all know what surely becomes of this unfortunate “school of fish”.

This story must teach us to be humble; to step back and re-examine what we value and what we are doing when we make a decision that affects a child’s life so profoundly. Our roles in the education of ASL bilingual children have an enormous impact on their lives. Many governments and groups engage in conscious language planning in order to control the process of language change and use among different social groups and populations in the interests of maintaining national, societal, and linguistic cohesion. In the name of cohesion, language planning can have devastating effects on minority languages—namely, the death of the language (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000, and this volume). In contrast, governments can engage in language planning for language preservation, language maintenance and language spread. Language planning can serve to enrich their population with the knowledge of a variety of languages and the cultural richness that comes with it. As such, minority languages are viewed as resources to be nurtured (Ruiz, 1984). Language planning touches every aspect of society—business, politics, social life, health and education. In its elaborate form, language planning is conducted in four arenas, namely, attitude planning, status planning, corpus planning, and acquisition planning. In the following sections we examine each of these dimensions of language planning with specific reference to ASL in Ontario.

### Attitude Planning

While this area is the least studied and written about it has the most profound impact on all other areas of language planning. According to The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language, language planning as a field of study dates only to the 1960s (Crystal, 1987). However, language planning has been active for more than two centuries in Deaf education. Nover (1992) has illustrated the evidence of language planning, starting with implementation of manually-coded French by De l’Epee in the 1760s and initiation of several signing systems--SEE 1, LOVE, and SEE 2 that were put in place in North America during the 1970s. We propose that the development of these systems in the 1970s should be called “method of communication” planning, rather than language planning, since such systems *are not* languages, per se. During that decade, the provincial schools for Deaf students in Ontario experienced the introduction of the Rochester Method (fingerspelling), followed by Total Communication, on the faulty assumption that these methods would enable Deaf students to acquire English skills the way hearing and speaking enable hearing counterparts to acquire English skills. Although there is *no* evidence that emphasis on one or another variation of such methods, including SEE 2, is even a partial factor in contributing to basic language proficiency, the focus of language planning in Ontario continues to be on the acquisition of English rather than the acquisition of a signed language with its own integrity, structure and knowledge base.

The stranglehold of imposing one or another variation of these “communication methods” on future teachers and their deaf and hard of hearing students interferes with students’ opportunity and ability to become lingually empowered and linguistically adaptable and versatile with one or more languages such as ASL and English. Despite the fact that research carried out during the past decade shows clearly that children who develop strong ASL proficiency develop better English literacy skills than those whose ASL abilities are weaker or non-existent (Strong and Prinz, 1997) government policies in Ontario continue to provide only minimal support for the development of ASL proficiency in the early years and for the implementation of bilingual bicultural education for Deaf students. For example, government policies discourage children who receive cochlear implants from developing fluency in ASL based on the empirically unsupported assumption that ASL will interfere with the acquisition of oral English.

Attitude planning is carried, consciously or unconsciously, into all other arenas of language planning (refer to Figure 1). It is therefore powerful and insidious, and exerts the greatest influence over either maintaining the status quo or creating destructive or constructive change in bilingual education.

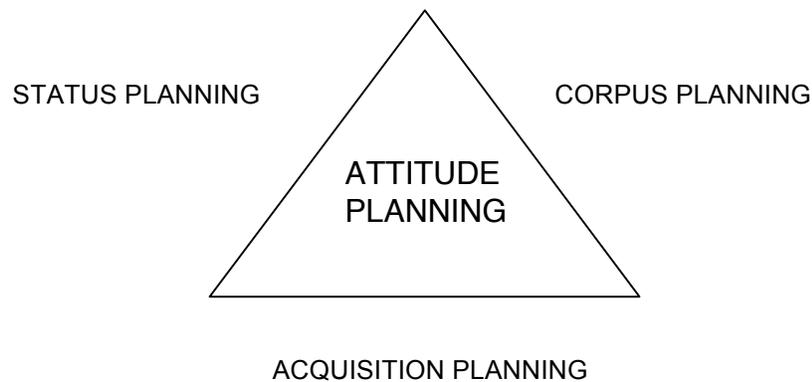


Figure 1 Attitude planning impacts all other language planning arenas.

Nover (1992) states that Deaf education has been assimilationist and dominating, with the goal of “hearizing” ASL children. Audism is a set of practices that elevates English and other spoken languages and devalues ASL and other sign languages. “It is the corporate and social institution that makes statements about Deaf people, governing where they go to school, teaching about them, authorizing views about them; audism is the hearing way of dominating, restructuring and exercising authority over the Deaf community (Lane, 1999, 43).

Language planning has characterized the history of Deaf education for three centuries although it may not have been explored earnestly from this perspective except by a few scholars such as Nover (1992), Mason (1994) and Lane, Hoffmeister and Bahan (1996). Various attempts have been made to teach ASL bilingual children the language of the speaking majority. Despite the nearly unchallenged recognition that ASL meets the criteria of a language, many educators continue to resist use of ASL in a bilingual bicultural setting. Despite its long and rich history in North America, and the fact that scholarly research on ASL is in its fourth decade, ASL has been slow to gain status in the academic community (Wilcox and Wilcox, 1992). Such resistance to ASL in the academic community more likely has a basis in sectarian dogmatism that English is superior and ASL is inferior even though both are equally sophisticated. The negative attitudes to ASL and other sign languages can be attributed to the incessant audist nature of our society. It is perpetuated by language planning efforts in the areas of acquisition planning, corpus planning and status planning when those responsible for language planning are unaware of their own audist views or the profound negative impact of those attitudes. In many parts of Europe, language planning efforts encourage multi-sign language use just as hearing children are encouraged to use many spoken languages (Mahshie, 1995). This contrasts with Canada and the United States which tend only to value English above all other languages; this implies that North America is highly sectarian relative to Europe. The majority of Deaf children in Canada and the US are raised without ASL because of the false assumption that intelligence is not possible without spoken language and that spoken and human communication are one and the same. This attitude impacts all areas of language planning for Deaf children including educational systems, such as Ontario's, that have accepted ASL bilingual education to some extent. These issues are discussed below in the context of status planning.

#### Status Planning

An example of status planning is the recognition of two official languages in Canada - English and French. For the educational system in Ontario, English and French are required to be languages used for purposes of instruction and as subjects of study. In 1993, Bill 4 was passed by the

Ontario Parliament to recognize ASL and LSQ as languages of instruction, with the efforts of the Deaf Ontario Community and Gary Malkowski, then a first-ever ASL-Deaf member of Parliament. The passage of Bill 4 has already resulted in changes to Ontario's Education Act. This Act includes "ASL" and "LSQ" in various clauses; however, there are no regulations that dictate how such law applies.

Influential ASL antagonists have interfered with efforts to draft regulations to define how and when ASL is to be used in classrooms. This interference results in exempting future teachers from having to be ASL proficient while allowing them to profess that they are qualified to meet the children's needs. This seriously compromises the integrity of the field. The term used in Bill 4 "may" is interpreted as a suggestion but not an expectation or requirement that ASL or LSQ be used as languages of instruction. For the last fifteen years, the Ontario Association of the Deaf (OAD), under the leadership of the OAD Presidents, community leaders and members have frequently asked the Ministry of Education to include four requirements in the proposed regulation. These requirements address staff ASL competency including evaluation and accompanying training; teacher training programs including in-service training and additional qualifications in the ASL curriculum and Bilingual Education; recognizing ASL as the language of instruction for all subjects; and mandating ASL curriculum as a policy document to implement ASL as a language of study and use fostering high levels of ASL literacy. The clauses in the Education Act remain dormant because of the absence of regulations needed to define how ASL and LSQ are expected to be used in classrooms (see *Language Policy and Political Issues in Education*).

#### Corpus Planning

Corpus planning is referred to by Cooper (1989) as "the creation of new forms, the modification of old ones, or the selection from alternative forms in a spoken [signed] or written code". In the educational system, English is used as an academic language. To support standardization of this language, ample resources such as dictionaries, curriculum documents and different forms of technology are provided.

In 1999, the Ontario Provincial Schools ASL Curriculum Team was established to support the bilingual-bicultural educational approach in the Provincial Schools for ASL Students. The curriculum was intended to describe learning benchmarks for students to develop and demonstrate academic ASL skills and academic ASL literacy skills. It has been developed for nursery to grade 12 in the Provincial Schools for ASL Students.

Prior to 1998, Canada had a dearth of its own ASL published resources to draw upon. With the establishment of the Deaf Heritage Project through the Canadian Cultural Society of the Deaf (CCSD), Canada is now beginning to enjoy its own ASL published resources including *deafplanet.com*, an ASL children's TV series, DVD and ASL/LSQ/English/ French interactive website, nominated for several Gemini Awards in 2004 and 2005, grand finalist for the prestigious International Japan Prize in 2005 and winner of the UN World Summit Award in 2005 for best e-content and creativity.

CCSD, the only national organization representing the cultural interests of ASL and LSQ Canadians and DawnSignPress an American publisher, as well as a few other publishers have now published a variety of ASL literature on videotape and DVD format. Only a few of these products meet the academic requirements defined by the ASL curriculum. Some are important examples of community-based language providing the rich heritage and critical link for students to their community while others are academically based. Literary analysis must delineate the variety of literature produced so they can be appreciated for the richness they provide (see *Literacy*).

## Acquisition Planning

Acquisition planning involves efforts to influence the number of users and to increase distribution of languages, literatures and literacies. Its intent is to improve opportunities and incentive to learn a language. Examples are use of English in commerce; revitalization of Gaelic in Scotland; and re-emergence of Hebrew after the founding of Israel. Acquisition planning encourages both language maintenance and language spread (see *Language Socialization*).

In respect to the classroom, any language arts curriculum is not sufficient by itself to extend the language and literacy knowledge and skills. The Ontario Curriculum employs strands to integrate learning of language structure and literacy. These strands were not previously addressed in the Ontario public education system.

The ASL Curriculum also uses strands. Its four main strands are American Sign Language, ASL Literature, ASL Texts and ASL Media Arts and Technologies. ASL teachers in the Provincial Schools for the Deaf use the ASL curriculum to teach ASL Bilingual-Bicultural students. Through the curriculum, ASL-using students gain knowledge of the language's semantics, lexicon, and syntax which enables them to use the language correctly and eloquently. The curriculum also provides exposure to, analysis of and production experience of ASL literary works. Thus students are exposed to a variety of expressive, creative, and playful aspects of ASL. They learn and acquire the cultural value of ASL literary works and literary works in general.

## Early Developments

The early history of the education of Deaf students begins in France in the 1760's and then travels to North America in the early 1800s when Thomas Hopkin Gallaudet, an English-speaking educator from the United States went to Paris, France to learn from Abbé Sicard, a hearing follower of De l'Eppée. Gallaudet returned to the United States with Laurent Clerc, a Deaf French Sign language (FSL) master teacher and together they founded the first school for Deaf students in the United States in 1817 in Hartford Connecticut, now known as the American School for the Deaf. As French Sign Language merged with sign language used by local Deaf people, ASL evolved. Clerc trained Deaf and hearing individuals, many of whom gained prominence, including Ronald McDonald who opened the first Canadian School for Deaf children in Quebec City in 1831 (Carbin, 1996). Over the next several decades, many Deaf schools were established, many teachers and administrators were Deaf and ASL and ASL literature flourished in the classrooms and Deaf community. This "Golden Age" presided until oral language was adopted officially in 1880 at the International Congress of Educators of the Deaf in Milan, Italy when sign language went underground and ASL teachers were no longer hired. By 1970, some educators recognized the disastrous effects of monolingual oral education and began to introduce signs to support spoken English (refer to Attitudes section in this chapter). Still the focus was on monolingual oral education. Not until the 1980's in the United States and in western and central Canada, did ASL bilingual bicultural education begin to take hold. The Gallaudet protest in 1988 calling for a Deaf president of the only university for ASL students in the U.S. and the publication of a working document at Gallaudet University, *Unlocking the Curriculum* in 1989 calling for bilingual bicultural education for Deaf students sparked a shift back to ASL education for Deaf students in the U.S. and Canada .

The "Deaf Ontario Now" rallies led by the Deaf community resulted in the *Deaf Education Review Report*, commissioned in 1989, a research review of the impact of native sign language on majority language acquisition (Israelite, Ewoldt and Hoffmeister, 1992) and establishment of the pilot bilingual program in Ontario. By 1993 the three provincial schools in Ontario adopted an ASL bilingual bicultural policy and Bill 4 was accepted in provincial parliament. Resolutions were approved in Alberta and Manitoba recognizing the merits of ASL as a language of instruction but have not been passed into law (see *Language Policy and Political issues in Education*).

Thus the history begins with promise, displays a backlash against ASL and then gradual progress

towards it once again. This repetitive cycle of growth, oppression and re-emergence of the language can be seen right up to current educational developments in North America and can be traced to the impact of attitude planning on the status, corpus and acquisition of the language.

### **Major Contributions**

David Mason had a pivotal role in introducing and eventually expanding on Bilingual Bicultural Education as an integral part of the Teacher Preparation Programme in the Education of Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Students at York University in 1991.

In 1996, the first teacher research in Bilingual Deaf Education was published (Small et al, 1996). This monograph was the first in Canada to highlight the insights of educators working in the field and to provide a forum for reflection on bilingual practice. Another monograph highlighting ASL research in classrooms, home and residence is expected to be published in 2007 (see *Research Methods in Language and Education*).

In 1998, the Ontario Provincial ASL Curriculum Development Team with two representatives from each Provincial School for ASL Students, under the direction of Heather Gibson, developed an ASL Curriculum that outlined expectations for ASL-using students' academic and conversational ASL competencies. The curriculum was designed to describe the knowledge and skills required at each grade level, providing administrators, teachers, parents and students clear expectations and norms for ASL, ASL literacy and ASL media.

The curriculum continues to be refined, piloted and field-tested (see *Language Testing and Assessment*). This process involved ongoing briefings and consultation regarding curriculum issues with the Ontario Ministry of Education Curriculum Branch, Special Education Branch and the Provincial Schools Curriculum Co-ordinator. The ASL curriculum includes general and specific expectations that outline the knowledge and skills students must complete at each grade level. It is intended to describe learning benchmarks for students to develop and demonstrate ASL skills and literacy skills at an academic level. This will ensure continuity in language development and acquisition.

ASL Literature Week is held by the three provincial schools for ASL bilingual students in Ontario every two years. It hosts a rich variety of ASL poetry, ASL stories, and other ASL literary works presented by well-known Canadian and American ASL professionals. Its purpose is to introduce students to successful ASL masters in the field such as ASL story-tellers and ASL poets. Supported in part by the Ontario Cultural Society of the Deaf, the festival activities create a place for students to take part in expressions of common experiences, history, cultural traditions, politics and controversial issues in the ASL-Deaf community. The festival enables students to apply the knowledge and skills they have learned in a classroom setting (see *Literacy*).

A most significant educational contribution is the establishment of a private bilingual school in Toronto, Ontario. Yeshivas Nefesh Dovid is a new model international Yeshiva High School for Deaf male students (<http://www.nefeshdovid.com>). Established in Ontario, with ASL used as the language of instruction, major emphasis is placed on Hebrew reading and writing skills. All teachers are ASL users. Yeshivas Nefesh Dovid offers a superior state-of-the-art general studies curriculum including an English curriculum as well as Hebrew language and Jewish Studies curriculum. The Nefesh Dovid tri-lingual curriculum follows all required courses approved by the Ontario Ministry of Education and is a provincially and internationally recognized High School diploma program.

Other significant educational contributions come from within the Deaf community. The Ontario Cultural Society of the Deaf established an ASL Parent-Infant Consultant Program, trained over 100 Deaf ASL Literacy consultants, established an ASL Parent-Child Mother Goose Program, running programs for parents of infants encouraging them to be comfortable, knowledgeable and

playful, sharing early ASL literature poetry and stories with their infants and toddlers. They also published *A Parent Guidebook: ASL and Early Literacy* (McLaughlin, Small, Spink-Mitchell and Cripps, 2004), *American Sign Language and Early Literacy* (OCSD, 2004) and *The ASL Parent-Child Mother Goose Program: American Sign Language Rhymes, Rhythms and Stories for Parents and the Children* (OCSD, 2004), videotapes and DVDs used widely across Canada and in Gallaudet University training programs in the U.S.. They have published *ASL Developmental Milestones* (Small, 2003), finally gathering the research to establish norms for infants using ASL ages 0–24 months. These contributions lay an early foundation for language acquisition planning in the school systems (see *Language Socialization*).

A 20 year project of the Canadian Cultural Society of the Deaf (CCSD) culminated in the publication of the Canadian Dictionary of ASL (Bailey and Dolby, 2002). This seminal work which has received 4 academic awards, standardizes ASL in this country, documents regional variations across the country and is a significant contribution to ASL corpus planning. An LSQ dictionary is the next corpus planning contribution being tackled by the CCSD.

### **Work in Progress**

Development and implementation of the American Sign Language Curriculum in Ontario is one of the most significant works in progress in an educational academic program in North America. Two ASL teachers were hired specifically to teach the ASL curriculum, an accomplishment unprecedented at the Provincial School for the Deaf. Growth strands, instructional strategies, ASL assessment, expectations, student activities and teaching techniques are taking shape as the curriculum is implemented in the provincial schools. Mini-workshops and training are regularly provided to build a common vision, knowledge and understanding of the ASL curriculum among staff. Sample workshops include, *Conversational and Academic Languages (BICS and CALP)*; *ASL Poetry Structures*; and *Metaphors and Similes Used in ASL*.

Intensive in-service training must be provided to focus on pedagogical approaches for using ASL as the language of instruction and for the study of language (on conversational and academic levels). Training includes the study and analysis of ASL curriculum design, research perspectives, and language acquisition evaluation.

Data on student learning has been gathered regularly, with ASL Proficiency Assessment used to establish measurable first language progress. The ASL curriculum provides learning benchmarks for students' development, ASL and ASL literacy skills expectations. To date, results indicate that the ASL curriculum has been on track, as its expectations align well with ASL grade-level learning skills (see *Language Testing and Assessment*).

The most significant community work in progress is the establishment of the Deaf Culture Centre under the auspices of the Canadian Cultural Society of the Deaf which opened at the historic culture, arts and entertainment Distillery District in the heart of Old Town Toronto, Ontario in May 2006 ([www.ccsdeaf.com](http://www.ccsdeaf.com)). It features a museum, art gallery, gift shop, research and archives, state-of-the-art visually rich technology highlighting Deaf historical artifacts, sports, ASL/LSQ literature, ASL/LSQ interactive website, television and multimedia production studio.

The Deaf Culture Centre is an international symbol of the Deaf community celebrating Deaf life. A public forum both historical and forward-looking, it is open to the public and rooted in the Deaf community. It provides education, language, literature, culture, visual and performing arts. It holds summer and winter institutes, ongoing workshops, school tours, classes, performances, permanent exhibits, special and traveling exhibits. The centre houses treasured historical, literary and linguistic documents, De'VIA (Deaf View Image Art created by Deaf individuals that incorporates Deaf experience and language) and ASL literary experts who serve as mentors for students and adults learning ASL. The centre promises to play a significant role in attitude planning as it is rooted in the Deaf community, fosters new creative expression in the Deaf

community and is open to different spoken language individuals and to different sign language individuals around the world to be enriched by the beauty, language and sense of place created by the Deaf community in this country and internationally (see *Language Socialization*).

### **Problems and Difficulties**

Across Canada, the cycle of growth, oppression and re-emergence is evident. In Ontario, for example, the Ministry of Education has resisted mandating ASL and LSQ skill requirements to obtain certification as a teacher of the Deaf. Currently, the Teacher Preparation Program for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Students in the Faculty of Education at York University requires only two courses in ASL for entry and “candidates with lesser qualifications may be considered” ([www.yorku.ca](http://www.yorku.ca)).

Lack of strong government commitment to supporting ASL is also evident in other provinces. In Manitoba, the ASL Bilingual Sign Talk Community Centre has closed. In Alberta, the bilingual Alberta School for the Deaf is no longer a government school; it is now under the Edmonton Public School Board that recognizes the merits of the bilingual education model. The Saskatchewan School for the Deaf has closed. Saskatchewan held a court case in 2005 dealing with a nine year old boy with a cochlear implant who could not read or write and had virtually no language since ASL ceased to be an option in that province. The judge stated that “in my eighteen years on the bench, I have seldom if ever heard of a situation which engaged my concern more than this one” (ORR, P.C.J., 2005). The judge concluded that it would be of great benefit for those “outside the legal system including educators, civil servants, politicians and other citizens” to read the judgement in response to the disastrous consequences when a child is denied full access to a strong first language. The court ordered the province to provide a massive commitment to teach the boy and his single mother ASL with a qualified instructor, that he be placed in a signing school for Deaf students outside of the province or that he be provided with a full time ASL interpreter at a school within Saskatchewan. At the heart of these dire circumstances is the need for a shift in all areas of language planning that does not tolerate the suppression of language (see *Language Policy and Political Issues in Education*).

### **Future Directions**

The Education Act in Ontario allows the use of ASL and LSQ as languages of instruction in schools. However, this permissive legislation does not *require* schools serving Deaf students to use ASL nor does it require teachers to have ASL proficiency. In recent years, the Deaf community has been putting pressure on the Ontario Ministry of Education to authorize a process to develop regulations on where, how and when the use of ASL as a language of instruction will happen. This same authorization should take into consideration an obligation for teachers of ASL students to have higher standards of ASL proficiency.

On the positive side, the Deaf Culture Centre is a community initiative that promises to enhance widespread awareness of the merits of ASL among all people, including those who use it and those who deserve to appreciate ASL better.

We challenge people of all walks of life including ASL antagonists and professionals associated with education to learn about and appreciate the many merits of ASL and how important it is for any ASL user. This means that everyone should examine their own attitudes and appreciate that linguistic minorities are integral to society as a whole. The future depends on how such attitudes change and how these translate into changes in educational policies. We stress that educators should not be audists serving in part as gatekeepers of languages; they should be professionals who support what each child, teenager, and youth has and who nurture them without devaluing their languages, including ASL.

Anita Small and David Mason

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