Quick Reference Guide: American Sign Language

**American Sign Language (ASL)** differs from aural world languages as a signed language that is communicated visually rather than a spoken language that is communicated orally. It is essential to use appropriate terminology when referencing the language and the community of people who use ASL. **Signer** is the term used to describe those who communicate in ASL, and the term **Deaf** is often capitalized when describing cultures/communities to indicate the difference between the physical aspects of deafness and “the cultural affiliation of identifying with a like group of people with a shared history, traditions, and language”.[[1]](#endnote-1)

*While the native language of many students learning ASL as a world language is spoken, students may have a variety of backgrounds and varying levels of exposure to ASL and Deaf cultures and communities. It is important to consider the unique needs and abilities of (1) deaf cochlear implant users; (2) hearing children who have Deaf parents or family members; and (3) students who are proficient in another signed language.*

ASL and Aural Modern Languages

For native speakers of English and other spoken languages, there are greater difficulties involved in the transfer of abilities from the first language when learning ASL in world language classrooms. ASL is represented through simultaneous manual and non-manual expression, which is vastly different from the way in which spoken languages are sequenced and structured. In addition to learning how to communicate in a physical modality, ASL students must learn how various head, eyebrow, and mouth movements mark or modify the grammatical structure of signed words and phrases. Physical space plays a significant role in how messages are received and produced while signing, making it important for students to understand how movements toward and away from the body can affect meaning or change the information being presented. Educators must therefore support students in developing (1) visual-spatial literacy; (2) gestural expression skills; and (3) knowledge of ASL communicative norms. To help students feel more comfortable viewing and using various parts of the body as a means of expression, educators may focus on different ways to communicate without signing before learning more complex concepts related to ASL vocabulary, grammar, and syntax. Native speakers of English and other spoken languages may feel anxious or self-conscious when signing, so it may be helpful to build their self-confidence in expressive language skills while simultaneously teaching ways to support classmates who feel uncomfortable when communicating in the language. Hearing students learning ASL may also attempt to use word-for-word translation from English to ASL, so it is important to explain how ASL is its own language rather than a signed version of English. Educators are encouraged to emphasize ways in which words and concepts are expressed differently in ASL as compared to English, and the following table defines various language functions and supports that are unique to ASL teaching and learning.

*Language Functions and Supports in ASL Classrooms*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Function/Support** | **Definition** |
| Classifiers | Handshapes used to represent nouns and verbs associated with specific categories |
| Fingerreading | Receiving and comprehending a fingerspelled word or lexicalized sign |
| Fingerspelling | Producing words or other expressions by manually rendering the form letter by letter |
| Glossing | Words in ASL represented in written English with markers to indicate gestures |
| Graphemes | Written symbols that transcribe ASL by representing a sign and its parameters |
| Parameters | Handshape, palm orientation, movement, location, and non-manual expression |
| Publishing | Producing signed communication using technology and digital resources |
| Texts | Live or published signed presentations  |
| Viewing | Recognizing, interpreting, and analyzing signed communication |
| Visual vernacular | Theatrical art form used to tell stories and express oneself in a visual way |

*Learn more about these functions/supports by viewing Gallaudet University’s* [*K-12 ASL Content Standards*](https://www.gallaudet.edu/k-12-asl-content-standards) *or searching online.*

Teaching Culture and Communities

Culture is an essential component of ASL teaching and learning, and it is important for educators to support students’ understanding of the rich history and culture associated with the language. Active, hands-on learning activities involving authentic materials (e.g., literature, theater, poetry, art, etc.) is recommended, and students may benefit from critically examining the lived experiences of Deaf community members. As many Deaf stories and literature have historically come from a limited perspective that does not include marginalized groups, it may be helpful to actively search for more inclusive classroom resources to address this issue. Representation and diversity are important considerations for teachers when selecting instructional materials and texts, and educators are encouraged to explore varied influences on the language (e.g., Native American Sign Languages, French Sign Language, Martha’s Vineyard Sign Language, etc.) and its varieties (e.g., Black American Sign Language) over time. Facilitating student connections and interactions with community members both in and outside of the classroom can support learners in (1) recognizing and understanding diverse populations of ASL signers; (2) identifying, analyzing, and deconstructing biases and misconceptions about the language; and (3) discussing more complex societal issues and their relationship to Deaf culture and history.

Effective Instructional Approaches

 “No voice” policies that limit any and all spoken English communication are commonly followed within Deaf culture and communities, and ASL teachers are encouraged to replicate this authentic practice by avoiding the use of spoken English.[[2]](#endnote-2) It is important to provide comprehensible input through the use of signs, images, and pictures, and educators may also consider using multimedia materials, tools, and resources to limit the use of spoken English in the classroom. Digital literacy skills are essential for effective ASL communication, and educators are encouraged to highlight how technology plays an important role in the Deaf community. Presenting video depictions of ASL conversations may help students recognize norms, learn new strategies, and determine which strategies may be more effective in this context, and it may be helpful to post QR codes linked to ASL videos throughout the school or classroom to encourage students’ interest and engagement in ASL learning.

Recommendations for ASL as a World Language

* Use and teach appropriate terminology when referencing ASL signers and Deaf community members
* Recognize the needs and abilities of different types of ASL learners in world language classrooms
* Consider teaching ways of communicating without signing when students are first learning the language
* Gradually introduce more complex concepts related to ASL vocabulary, syntax, and grammar
* Build students’ digital literacy skills by using various online tools and platforms throughout instruction
* Expose students to a variety of cultural products and practices related to ASL and the Deaf community including films, literature, art, theater, and other performance
* Provide comprehensible input without the use of spoken English to replicate authentic practices
* Consider using glossing to support students’ acquisition of grammatical rules and structures
* Encourage students to examine personal and global biases early on in ASL teaching and learning
* Explicitly acknowledge different dialects and regional variations of ASL throughout instruction
* Use materials and resources that include representations of ASL from various minority groups
* Connect the history of ASL to social justice by examining racism and discrimination in the Deaf community

For more research and a full bibliography for this and other QRG topics, see

[World Language Standards Literature Review Report](https://www.doe.mass.edu/worldlanguages/leader-network/literature-review.docx).

1. Ashton, G., Cagle, K., Kurz, K. B., Newell, W., Peterson, R., & Zinza, J. E. (2014). *Standards for learning American Sign Language*. ASLTA. Retrieved from https://aslta.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/National\_ASL\_Standards.pdf [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Quinto-Pozos, D. (2011). Teaching American Sign Language to hearing adult learners. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics, 31*, 137-158. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)