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Sign Language in English Language Learning among Deaf Learners

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Language is fundamental to communication, cognitive development, education, and social interaction, and for deaf learners, access to a fully accessible language is particularly important for establishing a foundation for subsequent literacy and educational achievement. Sign languages, as naturally developed linguistic systems with their own grammar, vocabulary, and conventions, provide an effective visual mode of communication and can enable deaf learners to develop language without relying exclusively on auditory input. Since many deaf learners have limited access to the phonological information that supports conventional spoken-language acquisition, learning English may present particular challenges in vocabulary, reading, grammar, and writing, making visual, written, and signed forms of instruction especially relevant [1].

The relationship between sign language and English development has consequently attracted considerable attention within deaf education and bilingualism research. Studies have identified associations between sign-language proficiency and aspects of English literacy and vocabulary, suggesting that a well-established first language may provide linguistic and cognitive resources for acquiring an additional language. Research by Strong and Prinz, for instance, examined the relationship between American Sign Language proficiency and English literacy and reported an association between stronger signing abilities and English literacy outcomes. Similarly, more recent research has identified positive associations between sign-language vocabulary and English vocabulary among deaf and hard-of-hearing children. Nevertheless, these findings should be interpreted cautiously, as an observed relationship does not necessarily demonstrate a direct causal effect [2].

English development among deaf learners is shaped by a range of interconnected

linguistic, educational, and social factors, including the age and quality of early language exposure, family communication, educational setting, access to proficient language users and qualified teachers, and opportunities to encounter English in written or spoken forms. Within this context, sign language can function not merely as a means of communication but also as a potential linguistic resource through which learners develop concepts, understand new vocabulary, and establish connections between meaning and written English. Teachers may therefore incorporate signing alongside visual materials, captions, demonstrations, written instructions, and other multimodal techniques to address learners’ diverse linguistic needs.

Despite growing interest in sign-language–English bilingualism, much of the existing literature has concentrated on ASL-English contexts, meaning that its findings cannot necessarily be generalized to educational environments involving other sign languages or situations in which English is learned as a foreign or additional language. This limitation highlights the need for further investigation into the relationship between sign-language proficiency and English development across diverse linguistic and educational settings. Examining this relationship may contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of deaf learners’ bilingual development while providing useful implications for English language teaching practices that recognize their existing linguistic resources and promote more inclusive and accessible learning environments [3].

The present study aims to investigate the relationship between sign language proficiency and English language development among deaf learners. Previous research suggests that strong sign-language skills may be associated with better English vocabulary and literacy outcomes. For example, Strong and Prinz found a positive relationship between American Sign Language proficiency and English literacy among deaf children. Similarly, Scott and Hoffmeister reported that sign-language proficiency can contribute to literacy development among deaf learners. Therefore, this study examines whether higher levels of sign language proficiency are associated with stronger English vocabulary and reading comprehension [5].

Based on these findings, the study hypothesizes that sign language proficiency has a positive relationship with English language development among deaf learners. The research focuses particularly on English vocabulary and reading comprehension and also considers teachers’ perspectives on using sign language in English instruction. The study aims to contribute to a better understanding of how learners’ existing linguistic resources can support additional-language learning and to provide pedagogical implications for more accessible and effective English language instruction for deaf learners [4].

In conclusion, the relationship between sign language proficiency and English language development is an important area of research in deaf education. Sign language can provide deaf learners with an accessible linguistic foundation through which they develop concepts, communication skills, and language awareness that may support English learning. Therefore, examining the connection between sign language proficiency and English vocabulary and reading comprehension can contribute to a better understanding of deaf learners’ language development [6]. The findings of such research may also help teachers develop more inclusive and visually accessible approaches to English language instruction that recognize and build upon learners’ existing linguistic resources.

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