

Informative Speech

I. Introduction

A. Attention Statement

As they sat in the restaurant conversing and laughing, the hustle and bustle of the lunch crowd in the background was quite distracting. However to them, the noontday sun, which reflected off windows was much, more of a distraction than any amount of noise could have been. Their conversation continued over the loud clamor yet not a word was spoken, the words were on their hands.

B. Subject Statement

American Sign Language (ASL) is the language used by Deaf people throughout USA and Canada.

C. Significance of Subject

This once frowned upon language, thought to be nothing more than a system of gestures has withstood the test of time, proving to be nothing short of an adequate, true language.

D. Point Preview

Today we will look at American Sign Language, starting with a brief history of the language including one movement to abolish it from society, then we will talk about it's discovery as an actual language and finally the current views held by Deaf people concerning ASL.

II. Main Point I

A. Subject Statement

The history of American Sign Language is one filled with discovery, oppression and finally triumph.

B. Documentation

According to the book Language Files, "The origin of ASL dates back to 1815 when Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet was commissioned to investigate methods being employed in Europe to educate deaf children."

C. Illustration (Visual aide-Thomas Gallaudet and Laurent Clerc)

While in Paris, Gallaudet visited the school for the deaf where he met Laurent Clerc. These are pictures of both Thomas Gallaudet and Laurent Clerc. These two men eventually made their way to the United States. The French Sign Language brought to America by Clerc served as a base for American Sign Language. Once the French version assimilated with signs in use by deaf Americans, ASL emerged. In 1817 the two established the first school for the deaf where ASL flourished.

D. Signpost

While the use of ASL spread throughout the US and Canada, it's glory was short-lived.

E. Documentation

In Carol Padden and Tom Humphries book *Deaf in America: Voices from a Culture*, they tell of the fateful 1880 World Conference for the Deaf in Milan, Italy where "the banning in schools throughout Europe of signed languages as a means for educating deaf children, and a new fervor directed toward the oral method began."

F. Illustration

This complete ban of ASL did not take effect here in America, yet the support for the oral method caught on. In an attempt to so-can "fix" the deaf children oral schools were established by the dozens where deaf students were forced to speak and lip-read. Students who attended these schools will never forget the experience of watching their classmates be punished for their inability to speak and for the use of sign language. Faces being dunked in bowls of water and hands being beaten with rulers are not the worst of stories told.

G. Signpost

The popularity of oralism was not permanent and even during its peak; it could not prevent students from using their natural language of ASL.

H. Documentation

In a 1994 article in *Time* magazine, Harlan Lane was quoted as saying, 'Try as they might, they were unable to stamp out sign language.'

I. Illustration

In 1913, in an attempt to preserve sign language on film, former president of the National Association of the Deaf George Veditz gave a lecture on film. In his lecture he paints a picture of the situation faced by many deaf Europeans whose language had been taken from them he tells of the horrors of the oral method and convinces Deaf Americans to protect their sign language.

J. Summary Statement

American Sign Language had a very tumultuous beginning, however the passion deaf people felt about their language would carry on it's legacy.

K. Transition Statement

Once ASL made it through the oppression of the late 1800's and early 1900's, it would still be decades before it was recognized with pride as a something beyond gestures.

III. Main Point II

A. Subject Statement

ASL made a comeback in the lives of many deaf people however it was still believed to be nothing more than pictures in the air with no linguistic structure. It was not until the 1960's that research would begin to prove the significance of this language.

B. Documentation

In Laurent Clerc's journal found in Harlan Lane's book *When the Mind Hears*, he wrote, "Indeed, if sign language were very pictorial it would be immediately understood and easy to learn; it is not."

C. Illustration

He goes on to explain the error of confusing sign language with pantomime. In pantomime, there are no ungrammatical errors, only unsuccessful ones. A person not fluent in sign language can easily make errors while at the same time getting across a clear message.

D. Signpost

Clerc's statements were way ahead of their time seeing as how it would be over a century before actual proof was given to these statements.

E. Documentation

A 1994 article published by *Discover* magazine tells of a groundbreaking conclusion reached by new-scientist Ursula Bellugi in which she states, 'The surface form of sign is terribly different ... but the basic stuff, the underlying organization is the same as for spoken language.'

F. Illustration (Visual aide-hemispheres of the brain)

At the Salk Institute, Bellugi has studied ASL since 1968. Once it was discovered that ASL has a grammar and sentence structure of its own, she began researching how it is processed in the brain. Fascinated by the fact that the two halves of the brain are specialized for different purposes, the left side dominating speech, while the right side perceives spatial relationships, she was determined to see how a visual/spatial language was processed. The conclusion, that sign language is predominately processed in the left side of the brain like spoken language, left no doubt as to whether or not ASL is an actual language.

G. Summary Statement

By the 1980's American Sign Language had found its place among numerous languages, standing on its own; separate from the belief that it is only a broken form of English.

H. Transition Statement

American Sign Language had gone through a series of attitudes since its beginning. It was now time to see how ASL would grow in a society where it was no longer seen as shameful and inferior.

IV. Main Point III

A. Subject Statement

Today, there is still controversy surrounding American Sign Language. There are those who take pride in their language and culture while others still look down upon it.

B. Documentation

The previously mentioned *Time* magazine article, *Beyond the Sound Barrier*, tells of the currently divided community. "Culturally, activists began distinguishing between "deaf" (with a small *w* to describe the disability) and "Deaf" (with a capital '*D*' to represent the language group)-"

C. Illustration (Visual aide- Deaf art)

To be Deaf with a capital 'D' is to be culturally Deaf. To use ASL as your primary mode of communication and to accept the fact that you are Deaf Today, supporters of ASL try to promote it's use through art. Here are some paintings by Deaf artist Chuck Baird. Each picture incorporates the ASL sign with a picture of it's meaning. For example, the sign color is located on the chin as seen here where the woman has her fingers painted.

D. Signpost

Along with its supporters, there are those who still feel ASL is not an adequate language and choose to use other modes of communication.

E. Documentation

According to a 1989 article in U.S. News and World Report, "There is a fear on the part of many hearing educators and parents that ASL will condemn their children to silence, isolating them forever from the hearing world."

F. Illustration

Some people still take the biological view of deaf people. That the only way for a deaf person to survive in today's fast paced world is to learn to speak and lip-read. There is a feeling of limitation by learning and using ASL.

G. Summary Statement

While some have found pride in a language completely separate from English, capable of conveying abstract thoughts and ideas, others still feel constrained by the language and choose to communicate differently.

V. Conclusion

A. Summary Statement

There has always been controversy surrounding the use of ASL by Deaf Americans and though having changed through the years, the controversy has not dissipated.

B. Post Point Review

Today we have looked at the early impact of ASL on Deaf people in America, it's discovery as a language and the controversy surrounding American Sign Language today.

C. Significance

American Sign Language will continue to grow and change as do any other languages, but Deaf people have proven that their language will not be taken away from them. As stated by George Veditz 1913 lecture, " As long as we have deaf people on earth, we will have signs."

D. Wrap Around

The next time you see two people conversing in sign language at a restaurant, you can remember that their signs carry words of power, beyond that of pictures in the air. Whether on the mouth or the hands, a voice can be heard from all of us.

Works Cited

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