

Using American Sign Language to Teach Chinese in the US

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USING AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE TO TEACH CHINESE IN THE US

Abstract

This article explores the use of American Sign Language (ASL) to teach Chinese in the United States. It introduces ASL, explains the reasons of using ASL to teach Chinese, and introduces a case study to illustrate the process of using ASL to teach Chinese. The idea of using ASL to teach Chinese was inspired by Ms. Nancy Cadjan's book *Baby Signing 1-2-3* (Cadjan, 2007) which guides hearing parents to sign with their hearing babies in order to reduce the babies' tantrums before they can speak. Since spring 2015 I have been taking advantage of ASL in my K-5 Chinese classrooms and have found it an effective tool in helping their acquisition of Chinese. My next step is to see how this process can be implemented in teaching Chinese to secondary school and college students as well as for teaching another language in the United States.

Key Words: American Sign Language, Teaching Chinese, Gestures

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Introduction

On a Saturday in November 2014, I was in the Dallas Public Library and a book by Nancy Cadjan caught my eye: *Baby Signing 1-2-3* (Cadjan, 2007). It is a guide for hearing parents to sign with their hearing babies in American Sign Language (ASL), to reduce the babies' tantrums because of their inability to communicate in words. Since I switched from teaching college English to teaching elementary school Chinese a few years prior, I had been searching for ways of using gestures to teach children Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL). However, gesturing did not come to me naturally. *Baby Signing 1-2-3* (Cadjan, 2007) appeared just when I needed it. I have been teaching Chinese with ASL since then and have found that it makes the acquisition of Chinese by the American children more efficient.

A Brief History of American Sign Language

American Sign Language, according to Vicars (2015), is a visual gestural language” consisting of gestures, facial expressions, and movements used in America and Canada. It is the third most-used language in the United States, after English and Spanish (Cadjan, 2007, p. 5). ASL started in early 19th Century when an American minister, Reverend Gallaudet, established the first permanent school for the deaf in Connecticut after travelling to France to learn the methods of educating deaf children (Vicars, 2015). While about sixty percent of ASL signs can be traced back to French Sign Language, Vicars (2015) notes that there was some indigenous form of sign prior to that time. More importantly, Vicars (2015) further explains the environment conducive to language development was also pivotal in the development of modern ASL.

Reasons for Using ASL to Teach Chinese

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Some may wonder why we use ASL, since our job is to teach Chinese, not a sign language. In fact, we are not teaching a sign language at all. We are only “borrowing a few signs from a vast language” (Cadjan, 2007, p. 4) to “increase the clarity of [our] daily interactions”(Cadjan, 2007, p. 6). We do not have to spend a lot of time learning a sign language. Since signing comes naturally to children, we do not have to make time for signing in our teaching, either. We “just add signs to the conversations and communications” (Cadjan, 2007, p. 6) we already have with them.

Some others may wonder then why we do not use Chinese Sign Language (CSL) instead, since we are teaching Chinese. Like languages, gestures or signs vary from culture to culture. For example, the Chinese gesture for “to look” is to put a hand over one’s eyes while the American gesture is to point one’s forefinger and middle finger to one’s own eyes and then point to the object or person. One would not teach an unfamiliar system through using another equally unfamiliar one. ASL signs, which are situated in American culture, are clearer to American students than CSL. In fact, ASL signs can help American students understand any foreign language, no matter whether it is Chinese or Spanish.

ASL is effective in helping children’s language development through three modes of learning: hearing the words the teacher said, seeing the image he or she signed, and performing the language by signing themselves (Cadjan, 2007, p. 10). As research funded by the National Institutes of Health finds, hearing babies who sign speak sooner, have larger vocabularies, better pronunciation, and speak in more complex sentences than their counterparts who do not sign (Cadjan, 2007, p. 11). They also have “more interest” (Cadjan, 2007, p.7) and “better skills” (Cadjan, 2007, p.7) in reading. More importantly, they have a start on a second language, which furthers their “lifelong language learning abilities” (Cadjan, 2007, p. 8).

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While a baby is a “foreigner” to our house (Cadjan, 2007, p. x), language learners are “babies” (personal communication, July 2, 2014) to our classrooms as described by Dr. Terry Waltz. I teach K-5 Chinese at a charter school. Each class has Chinese for a period of 45 minutes every other day in their own homeroom. ASL has helped these elementary school children acquire Chinese.

Benefits of Using ASL to Teach Chinese

Both teachers and students can enjoy the benefits of using ASL in their Chinese classrooms. As teachers, we do not have to reinvent the wheel and come up with our own gestures, which are only useful in our own classrooms and are also hard to track. Then, we can take advantage of the signs for abstract words such as “想” and “有,” which realia or pictures cannot help. For students, signing is a kinesthetic aid and helps them “do” the language. They can communicate an idea by signing and do not have to “fall back” (Krashen, 2005, p. 4) on English before they speak it in Chinese. In the meantime, signing makes children’s understanding or confusion visible to us and is a great tool for comprehension checking.

Both the teacher and the students can start to benefit from ASL even the very first time they use it. My first practice of teaching Chinese with ASL took place in a first-grade class as my teaching blog *A Chinese Workshop* shows on January 7, 2015:

When I asked them “你喜欢做什么？” students signed to me what they liked to do. Student A signed drawing, so I said, “Student A 喜欢画画.” Student B also signed drawing, so I said, “Student B 也喜欢画画, ‘也’ means ‘also’” while signing with an index finger for “also.” At this time, student A signed “also” to me with her index finger

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and then signed singing. I suddenly understood what she meant—she also liked singing!

She had signed drawing earlier. (Liu, 2015)

Before teaching the lesson, I consulted the free online video dictionary Signing Savvy (2016) and learned the signs for the abstract word “to like” as well as the concrete action words “drawing,” “singing,” “dancing,” and “reading.” Signing helped the children understand what I said in Chinese. What was the most exciting to me was that the children started to sign their ideas before they could speak them. With signing, they did not have to “fall back” (Krashen, 2005, p. 4) to English. Signing kept me in Chinese as well. I only said “means ‘also’” to explain the new word “也.” As I did not learn the sign “also” before teaching this lesson, I made it up at the moment. But it did not seem to matter at all. My speaking and signing helped the children and me create a language-rich environment, which allowed us to “live the language” (Lew, 1999, p. 174).

The Process of Using ASL to Teach Chinese

In addition to teaching the school curriculum as in the above example, I also teach songs, rhymes, and other relevant passages. To illustrate the process of using ASL to teach a Chinese song or rhyme, I selected the case of teaching the Chinese version of “Five Little Monkeys Jumping on the Bed”: “五只小猴蹦蹦跳。”

Step 1. Select a Relevant Passage

To celebrate the 2015 Chinese New Year—the Year of Monkey—I selected the rhyme “五只小猴蹦蹦跳” and taught it to my two first-grade classes. It is a shortened version of “十只猴子蹦蹦跳” by Dr. Cynthia Ning (Ning, 2011, p.?), which ranges from ten monkeys jumping in

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the first verse to no monkey jumping in the last. In the shortened version, “猴子” is changed to “小猴” to accommodate elementary school children. No monkey jumping in the last verse is also changed to Mama Monkey jumping, at the request of the children. The first and last verses of the shortened version are as follows:

五只小猴蹦蹦跳，

一只小猴跌倒了。

哭喊妈妈，妈妈笑：

怪你自己蹦蹦跳！

小猴妈妈蹦蹦跳，

小猴妈妈跌倒了。

哭喊宝宝，宝宝笑：

怪你自己蹦蹦跳！

Step 2. Learn to Sign the Passage

First of all, I learned to sign the rhyme by watching its English version “Five Little Monkeys Jumping on the Bed” in ASL on YouTube (LBChinaDoll’s Channel, 2011 needed). I then looked up the signs on free ASL online video dictionaries such as Signing Savvy, ASL University, and ASL Pro. A word might have several signs or variations, so I chose those that made sense to me or were close to everyday gestures.

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Then I decided the words to sign. In English, the tradition of indicating the words to sign is to capitalize and bold them. In Chinese, I choose to indicate them by shading them as follows. I also parse them so as to separate neighboring signs. For example, “**跌倒**” in the second line is one sign whereas “**小猴 跌倒**” in the same line are two signs.

五只 **小猴** 蹦蹦跳，

一只 **小猴** 跌倒了。

哭喊 **妈妈**， **妈妈** **笑**：

怪你 **自己** 蹦蹦跳！

小猴 **妈妈** 蹦蹦跳，

小猴 **妈妈** 跌倒了。

哭喊 **宝宝**， **宝宝** **笑**：

怪你 **自己** 蹦蹦跳！

Last, I learned to align the signs with the beats of the rhyme by either prolonging or repeating a sign. For example, I prolonged the sign for “**五**” in the first line to make it align with “**五**只” because there was no way to sign the measure word “只.” Sometimes I repeated a sign to make it align with the beat. For example, I repeated the sign “**猴**” in the first line to make it align with “**小猴**” because it was easier to repeat the sign “**猴**” than making two different signs “**小**” and “**猴**.” The repetition of the sign “**猴**” also created a vivid image of a monkey busy scratching itself.

Step 3. Teach the Passage

I started with speaking and signing the English version of the rhyme as a warm-up activity to help them understand the signs. Then I introduced the Chinese version by speaking and signing together. The signs helped making the Chinese words clear to the

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children, especially the obvious signs such as “五,” “跳,” and “哭.” However, for an abstract sign, I had to introduce an English explanation by using the “sandwich” (TPRS Publishing, 2016, p. 3) technique if I saw any confusion in a child’s eyes. For example, for the sign “妈妈,” I would say and sign “妈妈, **MOM**, 妈妈,” which helped me explain the sign in English quickly and then quickly switch back to Chinese.

When I introduced the rhyme, I asked the children to listen to me and concentrate on the meaning, so I encouraged them to follow me to sign, but not follow me to speak. However, it was difficult for them, so later I thought of the pattern: speaking, pausing, and then signing. For example, I would say “妈妈,” pause, and then sign it. This modeling helped them listen to my words first and then sign silently with me.

Step 4. Direct Students to Perform the Passage

The essential element of learning the rhyme is to let the children perform it. I divided them into groups of six representing Mama Monkey and five little monkeys and led them to perform the rhyme at the front of the class. They did not have to be able to speak it in order to perform. While they signed it and acted it out at the front, I directed them at the back by speaking and signing. They could follow me by speaking the rhyme any time they were ready. Performing was just another way of engaging them in hearing me speak, seeing me sign, and performing the language by signing themselves. They were having fun performing and watching the performances but meanwhile they were also acquiring Chinese and appropriate performer versus audience behaviors.

After two weeks, five periods, we started to learn new content in the required curriculum. At the beginning of the period I led them to speak and sign the rhyme

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together as a review and then perform it at the end of a period if we had time left. After another two weeks, another five periods, and before the Chinese New Year, they were able to speak and sign the rhyme by themselves. Some of them automatically stopped signing by then, preferring to only speak, but the majority of the children still spoke and signed together.

One day when I was leading a third-grade class to review the rhyme, a middle school assistant principal on the same campus happened to stop by the classroom. He was impressed by the children's engagement and told me that he would like his daughter to learn Chinese this way, too, when she entered this school the next year. He also shared what he saw in the classroom with our Chinese coordinator in the school district and told her that I did "a fabulous job teaching the kids Chinese" (X. Wang, personal communication, February 10, 2015). I took his compliments as clear messages that using ASL to teach Chinese in the United States is effective and I should continue.

Conclusion

ASL is fun and handy. It does not cost anything but it helps the elementary school children acquire Chinese. I would like to see it if it would help secondary school and college students acquire Chinese as well. In fact, Ms. Jian Gao who started to use ASL in her teaching of Chinese at about the same time as I, found it an effective tool in teaching high school students as well (J. Gao, personal communication, November, date? 2015). An American professor of mine used routine gestures to teach Chinese to her college students, which suggests that ASL has potential to help college students acquire Chinese,

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too. I would also like to see ASL implemented in teaching another foreign language in the United States

Signing came to me through baby signing books such as Ms. Nancy Cadjan's *Baby Signing 1-2-3* (Cadjan, 2007) and Dr. Joseph Garcia's *SIGN with Your BABY* (Garcia, 2002). I still read and re-read them. They not only guide me to sign with children but also have implications for foreign language acquisition itself. Meanwhile, I also watch baby signing videos on YouTube for fun while picking up some signs that I need during the course. Signing with our "language babies" is fun and easy. You may start with baby signing books or videos just like me, or simply look up a few signs in one of the ASL video dictionaries mentioned earlier for what you intend to teach tomorrow. As the Chinese say, "A 1000-mile journey begins with the first step."

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- [Add: Teaching Blog reference](#)

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[Add: Kashen, The Role of the First Language](#)

[Add: YouTube reference for Five Little Monkeys](#)

[Add: Signing Savvy YouTube](#)