

4-1-2008

# The role of sign language in a child's development: Teacher's perspectives and practices

Erin Fitzgerald  
*Trinity College*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/theses>

---

## Recommended Citation

Fitzgerald, Erin, "The role of sign language in a child's development: Teacher's perspectives and practices". Senior Theses, Trinity College, Hartford, CT 2008.  
Trinity College Digital Repository, <http://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/theses/133>

Erin Fitzgerald  
Ed 400 Senior Research Project  
Ed Studies Program  
Trinity College  
December 2007

The role of sign language in a child's development:  
Teacher's perspectives and practices

Introduction

Language is an essential part in a child's development. From the time the child is born it is immersed in a world where language is a necessity. When a child is younger much emphasis is put in teaching a child how to speak. This being true it is understandable why a child's first word is so exciting. It would be interesting to see if there was a way to speed up the language development, and in turn perhaps increase development as a whole. The article "Language Delays, Reading Delays, and Learning Difficulties: Interactive Elements Requiring Multidimensional Programming." By Ian Hay, Elias Gordon, (et all) suggests that early language development improves a child's reading development in the future. In some day cares sign language is an essential part of the program that is used in the infant, toddler, and preschool rooms. The idea of using signing with young children, starting at the infant age, has become a rising phenomenon. There are a plethora of parenting books and magazines that now have chapters or whole books on using signs to communicate with one's baby. One example is the book that is written by two authors that have studied this topic and done research on signing in infants that I will explain in more detail later on. The book is titled Baby signs: How to talk with your baby before your baby can talk, written by Linda Acredolo and Susan Goodwyn. They are mostly guides for parents that will explain the studies that have shown the impact signing can have on infants, as well as teach the parent signs that are appropriate for the child's age. My interest is to what extent the teachers believe in these programs,

and how it is implemented. My research asks: What is the role of sign language in a child's oral language development? How do day care teachers perceive and explain this role? How do they incorporate it in the every day classroom schedule?

### Significance

This research question is important because language is a vital part of a child's early development. As mentioned in the introduction Hay & Gordon's study found that early language development could improve a child's future development. This is important to the generalization of my research and the possible implications it can have. If there is a way to improve language development at a young age, then there can be further advances as the child gets older. One way that research suggests to help children develop oral language at a quicker pace is learning sign language as an infant (Thompson, Cotnoir-Bichelman, McKerchar, Tate, Dancho, 2007). Incorporating sign language in an early-childhood classroom can also help to identify developmental disabilities in children. For example, if a child is having trouble communicating and his/her language development is delayed the child could possibly be autistic, or have some other kind of mental or learning disability. Early detection can lead to a better chance of improvement. Sign language in early-child hood is important so that the children have a way to express their needs. In classes where there is a ratio of 3 to 1 for infants or 5 to 1 for toddlers it can keep the classroom easier to control when children can express their needs instead of screaming or biting. It is important to understand the teachers view point because most of the children are with them for the majority of their week so the teachers get to witness the child's development. The teachers are also the ones teaching the children sign language

and using it with them from an infant age, so they can see over time how the children react to it, how they interact with it, and how they implement it.

At Mouringville\* (pseudonym) child care center they teach sign language from the youngest age that the child is allowed to come into the center, which is six weeks. Most teachers use it as part of their daily routine, and I got a good understanding of a classroom where the teacher uses a lot of signing in every day situations.

### Thesis:

I argue that the teachers perceive that sign language does have a positive impact on oral language development of young children. The teachers implement signing, not only to help the child's development but also to help their classroom environments be calmer and easier to teach in. I also argue that the teachers implement signing differently in each classroom and at each age level, depending on the developmental stage that the child is in.

### Literature Review

There have been theories and studies based on the idea that sign language is a helpful tool to teach a child at a very young age. The studies began after the realization that deaf babies or babies of deaf parents who were taught signs were able to communicate with sign language earlier than most babies develop oral language. In 1988 M.L. Tabor thought that it made sense that a child be able to develop sign language earlier than oral language because sign language is easier to teach to children than oral language. The child can be physically prompted by the parent molding the child's hand into the correct formation to show the child how to communicate. Bonvillian, Orlansky, and Novack (1983) found in a study of deaf children that the child's first recognizable sign was noted

at 8.5 months, with their earliest sign being noticed at 5.5 months. Working off of that idea, Goodwyn and Acredolo did a study with hearing babies who were taught signing and found that these babies started being able to communicate through signs .69 months before any oral language was heard. The idea that a child can communicate before being able to speak has a couple implications that were also further researched. One implication is that the child will replace crying and whining with signing when trying to communicate their needs (Thompson et al., 2007). This is expressed widely by the teachers in my study. Another implication is that teaching a child sign language at an early age could enhance the development of oral language. In a study done by Goodwyn, Acredolo, and Brown (2000), the hearing infants, whose parents encouraged symbolic gestures throughout the study, outperformed the infants whose parents encouraged vocal language throughout the study, on follow-up tests that consisted of testing receptive and expressive vocal language. This literature set up a basis for my study, and I decided to see if the teachers who were implementing the signing believe that this research holds to be true, or if they had any other ideas of how signing affected the children. In all these studies the authors talked mostly about before the child is able to speak or communicate through oral language, and I wanted to also see how signing helps the child at all ages, even when they have developed oral language skills.

### Methodology

My research is a qualitative study that consists of both interviews and observations. The interviews were given to four teachers at least one from each classroom level (infant, toddler, and preschool) and one director. Each interview lasted about 30 minutes. Interview questions were worded to be less biased and generated a detailed response

because they were open ended. An interview question guide was followed but was not strictly focus on. This helped me to acquire information in the open ended answers that I wasn't expecting and therefore led to other questions that I would have not otherwise thought of. The interviews were essential in order to understand responses from a direct source in order to hear the opinions of the teachers. This way if I had any questions, or needed clarification, I could easily access that information. I was hoping to get similar responses from my interviews that I could confirm with my observations, and that created an intellectual connection to some of my research. My research is specific to one school, so I do not need to reach a large sample, making interviews attainable. To analyze the data that I collected from the interviews I did class observations to see if what I observed agreed with the teacher's responses. I observed in two toddler classrooms, two infant classrooms, and one preschool classroom. I spent 7 hours observing in the toddler classrooms, 5 in the infant classrooms, and 5 in the preschool. This age group is appropriate because it covers the age at which the child's language skills are developing and improving. By the time the child enters the preschool he or she is three years of age and, unless there are some developmental problems, can speak well. The preschool's use of sign language is not usually used to express needs as much as the younger classrooms are, but used more to continue what was learned before. My research is not based on preschool aged children but when interviewing the director I found out that when they started implementing signing in the classrooms about 8 years ago, the preschool was included in this implementation, so I thought it would be interesting to observe the preschool to see how the children used the sign language they had learned at an early age, now that they are all verbal.

## Context

Mourningville\* Day Care has two infant rooms, two toddler rooms, and then a preschool that is located in an adjacent building. In the infant rooms the ratio of teacher to child is 1:3, in the toddler rooms it is 1:5, and in the preschool it is 1:8. There are two teachers assigned to each room and the children are assigned accordingly, meaning that there are no more than 6 infants in a room each day, no more than 10 toddlers in a room, etc. The classrooms are very structured, and an hourly schedule is placed on a poster in each classroom so that the parents and children can see what their routine consists of. This structure was important because it relates to the constant theme of repetition and routine that was emphasized in the classroom, and was part of the reason the sign language was implemented in some of the classrooms that I observed. The times that I observed were mostly during “group time” which was when the teachers sat with the children in a circle and had an organized song and book time. The other time of day that I usually observed was snack time, and right after snack time, which was free play time. I have worked at this day care for 3 years now. All of the classrooms that I observed I have spent time taking care of most of the children, whether it was when they were in a different age group, or in the same classroom, so I felt that this gave me a head start on the children and teachers feeling comfortable with me observing in the classroom. The teachers seemed to be comfortable with the fact that they were helping me with school, and knew that I understood what goes on in the classroom. Some of the teachers did not

want to know what I was observing for, while others inquired heavily on what I was studying.

After interviewing the director I discovered that signing started to be strongly implemented about 8 years ago when most of the staff had recently graduated or were taking classes in early-childhood at UCONN. In this school program signing was greatly emphasized so they all used it with their children. The directors then found a seminar on signing and most of the staff attended and began to use signing, even if they hadn't learned about it in school. Since then some of the teachers have left and new ones come in, so signing isn't as apparent in every classroom as it used to be. Although it is important to note, that every classroom uses it at least a little bit, and it is still used in abundance in 3 out of the 5 classrooms that I observed. It is also essential to note that 2 of the 3 classrooms that use it constantly are the two infant rooms in the center. This is a good thing to note because from my research done on other people's studies the infant age is when it is found to be the most help for future development.

### Analysis and Interpretation

After I finished all my interviews and observations I concluded that sign language does help a child understand the meaning of certain words therefore enhancing their oral language development. Several teachers expressed that sign language helps with developing a child's language. The director of the center said: "Saying the word and signing along with it gives the child knowledge of the word and gives the word meaning". I saw a good example of this when observing that some children in the infant room start to say the beginning of the word when they are signing. They say "Meh" and do the sign for milk. The director embellished on this observation, expressing that she has

seen the children start just using signs for their needs and slowly fade out the signing and fade in the talking, little by little. I asked one of the infant teachers about if they thought that signing helped the child develop oral language and she expressed that she doesn't have an experience where they did not use sign language with the children so she doesn't have much to compare it to but she did say that she would think it would be a big help, because they are learning how to express themselves earlier. She felt that understanding language earlier, as she felt these children do, should speed up the oral language process. I observed that a lot of the children in the infant rooms, when they were getting to the age where they were able to make sounds that were beginning to sound like words, were very confident in the meanings of those words. They used words such as "group" and "song" (tried to say those words) that are not usual first words for children. It may be a sign of what the teacher had expressed that the children understand the meanings of words since they communicate them correctly through signing, and can therefore improve their oral language development by perhaps having a larger vocabulary.

Teachers expressed that sign language is most helpful to keep the classroom easy to run, and limits the frustration of the child since they are able to express their needs. One of the teachers at the center said "It helps the teachers run the classroom nicely, by limiting the child's frustration and teaching them to not freak out and throw food or scream and cry, so decreasing the bad behaviors that make it hard to control all the kids". She continues to express the importance that a child's ability to express their needs is helpful for the classroom and the teacher, but is also very helpful for the child because they learn at a young age how to express themselves in a calm way. When I was in one of the toddler classrooms I observed one child who is the only non-verbal child in the room

communicating with the teachers through signing. It was during snack time and the child wanted more milk so she started signing the sign for “more”. The teacher came over to her and asked her if she wanted more milk, doing the sign for milk, or more food, doing the sign for eat. The child responded by doing the sign for milk, and the teacher gave her more to drink. This is a great example of how a child can express their needs without having to scream and cry. Another interesting thing that I observed in the toddler classroom was when a child who was normally very verbal was sitting at group time with a pout on her face and would not answer the teacher or look at anyone, and would not give the teacher her toy that was not allowed in the circle. The teacher tried many times verbally to tell her that it was not allowed and that she needed to give them the toy. Finally the teacher started asking the child if she was mad or sad (did signs for both), and why she was feeling this way, and the child looked up and did the sign for mad. The teacher then was able to talk the child through the feeling, telling her it is okay to be mad and if she would like to talk a little walk to calm her body she could. When the child came back she gave the teacher the toy and everything was all settled. This was a good finding because it showed me how signing can also help children who are vocal express what they are feeling, and helped the teacher keep control of the classroom.

I also concluded that at each level (infant, toddler, preschool) the sign language is implemented in different ways. Through observations I confirmed one infant teacher’s response that said “The signing is used for basic needs, using words that one would need for survival. Words like “more”, “diaper change”, “eat”, “milk”, and “all done””. When observing in the infant classrooms I saw that sign language was implemented the most. Every couple minutes there was another signing prompt given to the children. This is

different than what I found in the toddler rooms. I believe that this is significant because when a child is an infant the oral language process is just starting and if they are able to speak at all, only use words such as “mama”, or “book”, or “eat”, which coincides with the signing that is first taught at the center. In the online researching that I had done it was studied that signing is very important at the infant age because it is the only way to communicate for most of the children, and can help speed up their oral language development. So it is important that in the infant rooms signing is used the most. Similarly, when entering the toddler room, more adjectives, and obedience words are taught. This goes along with the stage that the child is at. Some example would be learning colors and animals, as well as the fact that the child is becoming more verbal. Along with this the child, at about age 2, is starting to explore their boundaries, and it is important for them to know words like “stop” and “sit down”.

In the toddler rooms one teacher explained “It (signing) is mostly used in group time and during snack time”. My observations confirmed that most of the signing is done during group time and snack time. During group time the teacher used signing to teach the children how to sign colors and words. It was also used to tell them to “sit down” or to “stop”. In the toddler classrooms it is used during snack time the same as the infant room, to say “more” or “eat”. It is not used as often in everyday situations, like the infant room, mostly in organized group activities. At this age most children can express themselves with words, but instead of expressing simple needs like eating and getting their diapers changed signing was used in the toddler rooms to express emotions. I gave an example of this above where the child was encourage to express that she was mad, and learn that it is okay to feel mad sometimes. In both the toddler and infant rooms repetition

is key one infant teacher expressed. The kids pick up on the signing very quickly but the repetition helps to keep the children focused. The routine that the children follow throughout the day is also part of this repetition, and is helped along by signing. It is especially used in transition times. One toddler teacher expressed that successful transitioning is an essential part to their day. When I asked what she meant by transitioning she said “transitioning like, being all done with snack and throwing their plates and cups in the sink, then washing their hands before its time to play, or even something as little as telling a child ‘one more minute’ and then I have to change your diaper, or ‘one more minute’ and then its time to go inside after playing on the playground”. I observed these transitioning moments that the teacher talked about and found that signing was used, along with verbal cues, to help the children with transitions. In one observation in the toddler classroom one child was sitting on the floor playing with his cars. The teacher came over to the child playing and got down to the child’s level, on the floor, to make sure the child paid attention and said “in one more minute it is time for your diaper change”. When saying one, the teacher held up her finger, and did the sign for diaper change. The child did not say anything but looked as though he acknowledged the teacher and continued to play with his cars. When the teacher told him it was now time for his diaper change, the child at first did not want to move, but gathered up his cars and brought them to the bathroom. The teacher explained to me right after this happened “If I hadn’t warned him, he probably would have been taken by surprised and thrown a fit.” She continued to explain to me that they don’t always listen right away even when you warn them, but they do know its coming so it then becomes their choice to throw a fit or not, instead of being caught by surprise. I saw that the

teachers usually let the children bring what they are playing with into the bathroom, so that they would not be scared another friend would take it when they were getting their diaper changed. I noted that this probably also helps reduce resistance by the child. In this specific situation, the signing played a role in emphasizing what the teacher had to say. She had expressed how hard it is to get the child's attention, especially when they are playing with their favorite tool. So as important as it is to tell the child that he/she has one more minute before they need to stop, signing gives them another visual explanation that they can process if they are, for some reason, not really taking in the vocal cues.

In the preschool room it is used very little. It is strictly used for learning how to sign the alphabet, colors, and animals. It is not used at all for commands or to help a child understand what is to be done. This is because the children are all vocal and can easily express their needs. This also seems to make sense, since they are at a higher level of vocal ability and language development than the way that sign language is used, if at all, in the preschool. It is used when learning the alphabet. Like in the other classrooms signing changes according to how it can help the child best at their age. In this stage in the child's life the focus is starting to turn to learning to read, so the different uses of signing relate to the other development of the child. When a child is learning to read the child's learning abilities are really being tested. Signing can help the children who are more visual learners understand the lesson. Also having two cues, verbal and visual, at the same time can reach out to a wider range of learners. This is compelling because it shows that sign language is used differently in each level to enhance what is expected from the child at each specific age, and possibly furthering their development.

Each teacher described the use of sign language as a helpful tool, but some did mention that there are people who believe sign language can be detrimental to a child's oral language development. These people think that if the child is using sign language to communicate they will have no motivation to try and communicate through vocal language. The teachers all strongly felt that this was not the case.

### Conclusion

Overall, my observations and interviews have demonstrated that teachers view sign language in a positive light. Sign language is used in the classroom for control and teaching, and is believed, by the teachers, to be an oral language enhancer. If I was to work more on my study, I would observe more in each classroom and try and interview parents to get their points of view as well. The other thing I would try is to find a preschool that does not use sign language in their everyday classroom, and do a comparative study. This would give me more information on how helpful sign language is to the child's early-childhood experience, and this could lead to support behind encouraging early-childhood day cares and preschools to use signing as part of their curriculum.

## References

- Bonvillian, J. D., Orlansky, M. D., & Novack, L. L. (1983). Developmental milestones: Sign language acquisition and motor development. *Child Development*, 54, 1435–1445.
- Goodwyn, S. W., & Acredolo, L. P. (1993). Symbolic gesture versus word: Is there a modality advantage for onset of symbol use? *Child Development*, 64, 688–701.
- Goodwyn, S. W., Acredolo, L. P., & Brown, C. A. (2000). Impact of symbolic gesturing on early language development. *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior*, 24, 81–103.
- Hay, I., Gordon, E., Fielding-Barnsley Ruth, Homel, R., & Freiberg, K. (2007). Learning delays, reading delays, and learning difficulties: Interactive elements requiring multidimensional programming. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 40(5), 400-409.
- Tabor, M. L. (1988). Acquisition of American sign language: A review. *Contemporary Education*, 59, 62–66.
- Thompson, R., Cotnoir-Bichellman, N., McKerchar, P., Tate, T., & Dancho, K. (2007). Enhancing early communication through infant sign training. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, 40(1), 15-23.

## Appendix A