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## Adjusting to Change: Learning American Sign Language Online During A Global Pandemic

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# Adjusting to Change: Learning American Sign Language Online During A Global Pandemic

## Abstract

Second language acquisition of American Sign Language (ASL) requires opportunities for engagement with native language models (Krashen, 1988). The shift to online instruction due to the impact of COVID-19 presented unique challenges for ASL programs across the United States. With little time to redesign courses, instructors and students had to navigate the experience of online learning together. The students who participated in this 2020 study at Western Oregon University (WOU) shared their raw experiences related to this transition, and unfortunately, one year later, many of the same barriers reported by students persist. The purpose of this article is to share their stories, and present evidence that face-to-face instruction of ASL is essential and cannot simply be replaced with online learning without negative consequences. Access to immersion opportunities and consistent engagement with native language models are not easy to replicate in online environments, pointing to the fact that there is a need for face-to-face opportunities to acquire ASL when it is safe to do so.

## Keywords

American Sign Language, ASL, Deaf, Deaf Community, Deaf Culture, Bilingual, Remote, Online learning, Second Language Acquisition, COVID-19

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## Cover Page Footnote

I want to express my deep gratitude to the students who made this research possible, and to all students and colleagues who persisted in the midst of great challenges and fears. We are all in this together.

## Introduction

Western Oregon University (WOU) is home to a robust American Sign Language (ASL) Studies program that draws students from across the United States. WOU offers both a major and minor in ASL Studies, as well as other programs that require ASL skills, such as ASL Interpreting, and Rehabilitation and Mental Health Counseling. One of the benefits of having multiple courses that necessitate the use of ASL is that there is a sizable community of Deaf faculty and staff who teach across these programs. This community serves as a language model for students who are learning ASL.

The ASL Studies program offers three years of core ASL classes, and various electives that students can take depending on their interests or future plans of study. Historically, almost all core ASL courses have been taught face-to-face. This decision was made intentionally to promote a strong community of ASL users on campus, and to better support the academic learning and social acquisition of this visual-spatial language. In addition to ASL classes, students can join the student-run ASL Club and participate in ASL community nights that are held on WOU's campus. ASL community nights are open to the public, and the goal is for local Deaf community members to engage with students and support them in their language acquisition. These events are well attended, often drawing 75-100 students at various stages of learning ASL, and 5-10 Deaf community members to each event. Based on feedback from students and the Deaf community members, these events offer a mutual benefit to both communities. Students have access to more native language models, and Deaf community members have the opportunity to help shape and support students as they learn and acquire ASL and begin their journey into the Deaf community.

Historically, offering ASL courses face-to-face has allowed faculty to create language-rich environments that are conducive to acquiring ASL. Students can engage with their Deaf instructors, other fluent ASL professionals and one another as they get ready for class, walk down the hall, or pass someone they know on campus. Attending community events, where they are immersed in the language, students engage with native language models and—through these reciprocal interactions—continue to acquire this new language.

This approach to teaching and learning ASL has been effective for students in our program, with many going on to complete graduate programs or work in the Deaf community. In February 2020, social distancing mandates were announced due to COVID-19, and remote delivery of all courses became mandatory. Like many other programs around the world, the team at WOU had very little time to transition face-to-face courses to an online platform ready for remote delivery. This forced transition was not only difficult for ASL faculty, but also for students who had become accustomed to taking ASL in live, face-to-face

environments. This study was devised to capture a glimpse of students' experiences during this transition, and to identify possible barriers to ASL acquisition created by this shift in instruction.

## **Review of the Literature**

The body of research that points to the efficacy or inefficacy of teaching ASL online is lacking. Pudans-Smith (2019), reported in her dissertation research that beginning level online and on-site ASL courses are comparable. She explained the importance of course design, and the role of what she labeled "ASL Pals," who served as language mentors and tutors for students who were enrolled in online courses. Pudans-Smith concluded that there were no significant differences between student outcomes when completing an ASL course online versus on-site. She explained that this might be due to the addition of language models, the pedagogical approach used, the specific course design, the online platform, the small sample size (n=12), or the professional status of participants in her study. One thing to note is that the participants in this study were not college students, and this could have had an impact on the type of learner that participated in her research, as well as her results. Her study was conducted at Gallaudet University, which is the world's only Deaf liberal arts university. Individuals who know about Gallaudet and its programs are likely to come to the experience with a different understanding of Deaf culture and ASL than most entry level (ASL 1) college students. This may have had an impact on the results of the study.

Pudans-Smith referenced an older dissertation study by Radford (2012) that drew the same conclusion, that there was no difference between student outcomes based on modality of course delivery. She noted that one limitation of his study was that he determined skill level based on students' receptive ASL skills, and not based on their expressive ASL skills. This is an important distinction, because there are many free online websites, videos, and programs that offer ASL lessons, but most are not reciprocal. This means students watch ASL source content, but do not have an opportunity to practice their own sign production and receive feedback.

Pudans-Smith's suggestions for future studies are exciting, ranging from research on additional levels of ASL, to whether there are specific ASL courses that should be taught on-site, to measuring the skill levels of students who completed all of their ASL courses online to determine if they have the fluency and mastery required to become interpreters. These are critical questions that I hope will be researched in the future.

Unlike the research done by Pudans-Smith or Radford, my research does not measure receptive or expressive language skill, but rather attitudinal shifts and personal narratives around the experience of learning ASL online due to the

COVID-19 pandemic. I use the following theoretical frameworks to examine the experiences presented in this research: Second Language Acquisition Theory (Krashen, 1988) and the Community of Practice (CoP) model (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

### **Second Language Acquisition Theory**

The acquisition of American Sign Language (ASL) as a second language is still a relatively new field of study. According to Krashen's fourth hypothesis, a critical component of language acquisition is access to quality language input (1988). In this hypothesis, he explains that language acquisition is not about memorization of vocabulary, grammar, and rules. Instead, fluency of language is a result of interaction with language models who provide quality input and instruction. Fluency cannot be directly taught, and acquisition of language is dependent on engagement with native language users. He draws a distinction between learning a language and acquiring a language (1988). The former typically occurs in the classroom, and the latter most often occurs when immersed in rich language environments where students are able to engage in reciprocal conversation with fluent individuals. Krashen also states that for language acquisition to take place, the language input should be at a slightly higher level than the present level of the student's understanding (1988). Native language users often engage in a process called code-switching, which means they adapt their language to meet the needs of the person with whom they are interacting (Quinto-Pozos & Mehta, 2010; Wilcox & Wilcox, 1997). While this can be advantageous in many instances, there is a need to ensure that this code-switching maintains a language input slightly higher than the receiver's present level of understanding.

With the shift to online learning due to COVID-19, all of the ASL courses at WOU had to quickly be modified and made ready for delivery spring term 2020. Not all of the faculty had experience teaching online, so many were learning to use new tools and platforms, while also trying to change course material in preparation for students starting the following week. Unlike spoken languages that could transition to virtual platforms more readily—so long as the audio connection was good—there were many other factors that had to be considered for teaching ASL online. For example, the use of space in ASL is important and impacts the meaning of a statement. The use of space is limited when teaching online, as it must fit within the frame of the video camera and computer screen. Additionally, in ASL, some grammar is conveyed through facial expressions, and these small movements are easily missed when learning the language online, especially if the video connection is not clear or the internet speed is slow.

With less access to high quality language input, students' opportunities for language acquisition decreased. Whether or not this decreased opportunity will lead to long term impacts in students' acquisition and fluency of ASL remains to be seen, and is out of the purview of this particular study. The importance of quality language input cannot be overstated, and this presents a unique challenge to acquiring ASL online. Additionally, due to the social distancing mandates as a result of COVID-19, there are fewer opportunities for students to engage in face-to-face interaction with native language models.

### **Communities of Practice**

A Community of Practice is defined as a group of people who gather together for a shared purpose or experience (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Under this definition, the Deaf community, as a whole, could be considered one large community of practice due to shared language (ASL), culture, and adherence to community norms. The Deaf community can also be broken down into smaller communities of practice, focused on different topics or groups of people (e.g., artists, scholars, educators, church groups, sports teams, business owners). Within these communities, there are often different language registers used by the community members. For example, a community of practice of Deaf practitioners in the medical field will use different jargon, terminology, and vocabulary than Deaf individuals who own their own business or who are performers.

According to Lave and Wenger, learning happens most effectively when situated in an environment that allows for natural acquisition and not rote memorization of knowledge. For successful language acquisition to take place, students must be able to engage with language models in these various communities (Cornell-Swanson, 2001). If an ASL student is interested in later becoming a medical interpreter, it would be important for that student to engage in communities where they are exposed to Deaf people using medical terminology and classifiers in ASL. By contrast, if a student wants to work in an educational setting, engaging in communities that use that vocabulary would be important for natural language acquisition to occur.

Within all communities, there are different roles: most notable, the roles of newcomers and old-timers (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Newcomers are those who are new to the community, the language, or the content. Old-timers are integral members of the community, who have more experience, expertise, history, and knowledge. For example, a student learning ASL for the first time at WOU would be considered a newcomer to the Deaf community, whereas a Deaf person raised in the Deaf community would be considered an old-timer. As the student learning ASL begins to engage with more native language models, and acquire more language, they might participate in more specific Deaf communities of practice

(e.g., volunteering at a school for the Deaf, attending Deaf theater productions, joining a Deaf softball league) (Gournaris, 2019). As they engage with more older-timers in the community and participate more actively in those communities, there are more opportunities for reciprocal participation and language acquisition to take place.

Access to this type of engagement was severely limited by the social distancing mandates put into place due to COVID-19. Opportunities to attend face-to-face events became almost non-existent. In an effort to still engage with native language models, many students attempted to join online communities, but opportunities to use both expressive and receptive ASL skills were limited. These online spaces filled a void in the absence of face-to-face interaction, but it is important to note that most online environments do not provide the same type of reciprocal engagement that face-to-face interactions provide. For example, in the classroom, students get divided into conversation groups to practice new ASL lessons, and the instructor walks around the room and gives feedback and corrects individual students and groups. It is more difficult online to recognize that a student is not fully understanding what is being said, because there are fewer one-on-one interactions between the native language model and each student. When in small groups, online students are placed in breakout rooms, and there is no way for the instructor to be in all the rooms at one time. This limits the ability to give quick correction and assess where students need additional support. This reciprocal exchange of language, in the moment, is missing from online environments. The same is true for online conferences, workshops, and other events where the person who is hosting the event does most of the talking, and students have very little opportunity to respond and practice their emerging expressive language skills.

### **Research Methodology**

This study used a qualitative research design, consisting of both structured and semi-structured interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Prior to the start of the study, I received approval from the Institutional Review Board to complete this research. The structured portion focused on participants' demographics, prior history and exposure to ASL, while the unstructured portion addressed my three research questions. I facilitated three focus groups, interviewing a total of nine participants (n=9). A total of eight participants identified as female and one identified as male. Seven participants identified as white, one participant identified as multiracial, and one participant did not disclose their race. Participants ranged in age from 20-25, all having prior exposure to ASL before starting ASL courses at WOU. Participants either majored in ASL Studies or ASL Interpreting. Each focus group interview lasted two hours and was conducted via

Zoom. I conducted the interview in American Sign Language with an interpreter who translated my questions and follow-up responses into spoken English. Students responded to my questions in spoken English and their responses were interpreted to me in ASL. Each focus group was recorded, and the audio files were sent to a company (Rev) for transcription. To ensure validity and reliability of my data, I engaged in member checks with each participant by sharing the transcript from their focus group with each person for review before I started my data coding and analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Students had the opportunity to clarify their answers or provide additional comments during this follow-up session. This follow-up session provided an opportunity for data triangulation, because students could add to or change their answers after their initial response during the focus group interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

### **Participants**

To qualify for participation in this study, participants had to successfully complete ASL 1-8, and be enrolled in ASL 9 during the spring term of 2020. At the beginning of the term, all ASL 9 students received an email invitation with more information about this study. Students who were interested in participating completed a brief demographic survey and consent form for me to review. Based on their responses, I used purposive sampling (Seidman, 2013; Yin, 2018) to select nine participants (seven female, one male, and one did not disclose). All participants were undergraduate students, and their ages ranged from 20-35. Of the nine participants, only one had taken any ASL courses online prior to spring term of 2020.

### **Instrument**

I designed an interview protocol for this qualitative study that consisted of both structured (demographic and prior history) and semi-structured (research questions) interview questions. The interview consisted of a total of twelve questions, with some questions containing subparts meant to solicit additional information from the participants. I added follow-up questions as needed during each of the focus group interview sessions.

### **Research Questions**

To better understand the impact that the transition to learning ASL online had on students, this study explored the following research questions:

1. How do students in an ASL program at a rural west coast university describe their transition to learning ASL online, after taking three years of ASL face-to-face?
2. How do students in an ASL program at a rural west coast university describe the challenges of online learning for second language acquisition?
3. In what ways do students learning ASL at a rural west coast university feel their opportunities to engage in Deaf communities of practice have been impacted by their transition to online learning of ASL?

The goal of this study was to determine the underlying reasons students may have struggled with the transition to learning ASL remotely, and identify how decreased ability to engage with native language models in communities of practice (face-to-face) impacted students' perception of their learning experience.

### **Data Collection**

I conducted three focus group sessions, each lasting about two hours. The first group had two participants, the second had three participants, and the third group had four participants. The original goal was to have three participants in each session, but due to scheduling conflicts, I determined it was more important to ensure all participants could participate fully than to have the same number of participants in each focus group. The goal of my data analysis was to explore patterns across all participants, not to compare responses between groups, so other than the benefit of additional engagement between students, the number in each group was insignificant. Participants' responses were recorded, and after the transcripts were shared, edited, and verified, I used their verbatim responses to the interview questions in my coding and data analysis.

### **Limitations**

There are several limitations to this research study that should be addressed. First, the majority of participants in this study identified as white, and the privileges and opportunities that are afforded to white individuals are often different than those afforded to individuals who identify as people of color. The student body at WOU is predominately white, so increasing the ratio of non-white individuals in this study would have been very difficult.

A second limitation of this study is that the interviews were conducted in spoken English. In the ASL Studies program, students must refrain from the use of spoken English in the classroom, and are encouraged to fully participate in an ASL-immersion environment. The decision to facilitate these interviews in English was not one I took lightly. Due to the need for immediate research related

to the transition to online learning of ASL, I decided that conducting the interviews in ASL would take too much time, because it would require me to translate all the participants' comments into English. They would then need to read my translations before I could begin coding. This translation work takes an extraordinary amount of time, so I decided to ask students to use spoken English because it could be recorded and transcribed in 48 hours, and students could more easily ensure the transcriber accurately captured their words. This process also allowed me to capture direct quotes from students and use their own words to describe their experiences. The shift to the use of spoken English might have had some unknown effects on students' responses, primarily because they are accustomed to using ASL with Deaf professors on and around campus.

A third limitation to this study is that it happened during the peak of a global pandemic. At that time, there could be no prediction of whether courses would continue to be held online or return to face-to-face delivery the next academic year. The research was timely, and the purpose was to collect student feedback and experience and use it to inform our practice if we had to continue to teach online. If I had more time, I could have interviewed additional participants or completed follow up interviews once it was determined that academic year 2020-2021 would be delivered remotely. It would have been interesting to compare students' initial reactions with their thoughts and experiences six months later.

### **Data Analysis**

I used an inductive analysis approach to review the interview data collected from the three focus groups (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). My goal was to code the data and find patterns in students' experiences related to the barriers of online second language acquisition of ASL. Based on this analysis, I identified three key themes that showed up across students' narratives and those themes were used to help explain my findings.

### **Findings**

The first theme addresses individual impacts, specifically: physical health, social disconnection, and students' emotional and mental health. The second theme relates to students' experiences as they navigated the shift to online learning. The third theme explores students' opportunities for second language input and output. All three themes were echoed throughout the focus groups. During the annual Second Language Learning & Disabilities Conference, I shared these three themes and my findings with fellow second language educators, and many shared that their students have expressed the same basic experiences, irrespective of

which language they were learning. It is too soon to know if there will be negative impacts on students' skill levels due to the transition to online learning, but according to the students in this study, the transition is not without impact.

### **Theme 1: Individual Impacts**

**Physical Health.** When social distancing mandates and stay at home orders were put into place due to the spread of COVID-19, many restaurants, bars, gyms, schools, museums, and other public attractions were closed. Students shared that these closures led to a sedentary lifestyle that was vastly different than their normal daily routine. One student explained,

I think for me a really big transition was the physical transition. When I am on campus, I am usually walking three to four miles a day and I have a very active job as an ambassador giving campus tours. And that was all taken away from me. I had to do everything online from my desk sitting at a computer. That was just really, really difficult for me because I like to be active and with a lot of things closed, that made it hard to go out and be active.

Another student shared a fear of being judged for getting outside and walking around, even though they knew they needed to be physically active to remain healthy. A third student lamented the closure of WOU's campus, which led to students losing their jobs—for many, that was their only source of income.

Whether the students were still located on WOU's campus, or had to move back home, all nine students expressed an increased amount of time in front of their computer screen and decreased physical activity compared to before the pandemic started. This decrease in moving about the community led to physical isolation for all nine students.

**Social Disconnection.** Another common experience students faced was the feeling of social isolation and disconnection from peers and their surrounding communities. Even though students were actively engaged with their classmates and instructors in online classes, the majority of participants reported feeling socially isolated and uninterested in seeking out opportunities for connection with others. One student stated,

I noticed that, I am thinking it is because of having to see my face on a screen, it is so much more emotionally draining to do these sorts of things. My social stamina has reduced greatly. Usually when I am talking face to face with people I can hold a conversation at least for a couple of hours.

But I have noticed with these Zoom calls, if I am already a little bit socially drained... being in front of people going to turn on my laptop to see myself on my screen and then having to engage with people, it is very emotionally exhausting.

Other students echoed this sentiment, sharing that connecting with their friends on a virtual platform after being online for school felt like an added burden, and that it was easier to avoid interacting with their friends than to expend additional energy when they already felt depleted. Several students shared that in the absence of walking with roommates across campus, going to the dining hall, or attending campus events, their network of friends decreased greatly during the COVID-19 pandemic. As one student described, "...the hardest part for me, was dealing with the disconnect from people, because I wasn't physically with people. And just seeing people on a screen, just didn't feel real."

**Emotional and Mental Health.** By far, the largest individual barrier students reported was the impact that this transition to online learning had on their emotional and mental health. A common theme some of the students faced was being alone for the first time, because their roommates left campus or could no longer afford to stay in town. One student shared, "I noticed that a lot of my negative emotions are usually being distracted by a lot of busy work. So, because of the pandemic I did not have that busy work, it was really hard to really just sit with myself and do a lot of, I guess soul searching". This experience was echoed by several others in the focus group who noticed that an increased amount of time alone led to more instances of depression and anxiety. One student explained, "I was very comfortable sitting in my room all day. I was living alone, I wasn't taking care of myself. I would just do my homework, and just sit in bed. And I just wasn't taking care of my body, or my mind."

In contrast, some of the students in this study had to move back home and live with their parents, and while they were not isolated and alone, this was a very difficult change according to their experiences. One student shared,

So, for my mental health and my emotions for sure, [it] definitely took a toll this quarter, just because I had to move home and I was so used to living independently for two years, then I had to go back home. And then not having as much support as I did that—I am not saying my parents were not supportive, they totally were, but I am an extrovert. I totally go off of other people' vibes and attitudes. So, going home, it was hard for my mental health...I feel like I was crying at least two times every week, over the most pointless things ever...As an extrovert, it was still really difficult to not have human connection. It was hard to keep in touch with friends who I don't see every day. My love language is touch, and when I

can't touch the people I'm close with and love and see them, it's really difficult. So, that was a huge, emotional, mental struggle, not being able to connect with loved ones.

Other students expressed similar sentiments about moving back home. After having a taste of freedom while living away, it was difficult to follow household rules and expectations, and fall back into the routine of babysitting siblings while losing independence. All of the participants explained that their parents were wonderful, but that the transition back home was still one of the most difficult experiences. One student commented on her experience moving back home,

I left for two years. I have a schedule [I have to keep at] home. You don't always see eye to eye. So, that was a big one, especially mental or like an emotional one as well, because I'm so independent. I don't have to ask [my parents] to go out, but I live under their house, so I feel like that's the polite thing to do, but sometimes I want to go out with friends and there's the problem with COVID and everyone gets nervous that I'm going to bring COVID home or something like that.

Across all three focus groups, it was clear that whether the student stayed on campus or moved back home with their parents, this experience was a difficult one for them emotionally and it impacted their mental health.

In addition to the physical, social, mental, and emotional impacts that students experienced as a result of the shift due to COVID-19, there were also struggles and frustrations that came about due to learning a visual language online. Even in the absence of a global pandemic, research points to a dissatisfaction of learning ASL online due to the lack of connection with peers and the instructors (Radford, 2012).

## **Theme 2: Change to Online Learning**

**Struggles of Learning ASL Online.** The transition to online learning due to COVID-19 happened so quickly that students and faculty had very little time to prepare for the shift. Many students had to find a new place to live or had to move back home. They had to quickly purchase the technology needed to take their courses online, and adjust to this new reality during the last term of the academic year. Instructors had to modify their face-to-face courses for online delivery, and many had to learn to use new online platforms they had not experienced prior to the pandemic.

The shift to online learning was difficult for most of the students in this study. One student shared,

I don't think that learning ASL online is equivalent to face-to-face, only because I feel like a lot of people learn a second language, or acquire a new language by practicing it. And because we're all in our homes and there's not really anybody to really work on and practice ASL with, a lot of our skills will be...[declining]. And that was my experience. I felt like my skills were declining because I couldn't really socialize with a lot of people.

One of the biggest challenges students discussed was the impact of less frequent class meetings. Some courses were offered completely asynchronously, and students shared that the flexibility those courses offered was not worth the missed opportunity to engage live with peers and the instructor. One student explained her biggest challenge,

Yeah, I think it's very clear that ASL is facilitated much better face-to-face. Expanding specifically personally, I think when I'm in the class I'm feeling much more comfortable signing outside of the class because right after class, I'm still with my classmates and we can still walk to our next class together signing. And when everything got moved to online, it was like the moment my video camera went off, I was done signing. I was signing so much less than ever [before].

This decrease in practice time has an impact on language learning and acquisition. As an instructor, I noticed that students did not ask as many questions, did not arrive to class early or stay after to engage, and there was not the same sense of excitement about learning the language that there typically is in face-to-face environments. Part of this could be due to the individual factors identified in the themes, but it could also reflect the uncertainty that came with our world facing a global pandemic. According to students' narratives, the shift to online learning did impact their motivation and attention in negative ways. One student explained her struggles by saying,

I think that part of the struggle actually for me was technology issues that made it easier to miss things. Because I don't have totally stable internet connection. Because there were four people in my house taking online classes at the same time...and the screen would be freezing in ASL...And so that would make me miss a lot of things. The same thing with the signing space too, I guess it definitely was hard to keep it very constrained. But another thing was that in [face-to-face] class, it was easier to ask questions...If you are confused, it's harder [online] to be like,

“What are you saying?” So that was just one thing I did not really think of before, was I already was not really likely to ask questions, but I was even less likely [to do so] when online.

Knowing that students are less likely to ask questions, it is really important for instructors to check for comprehension regularly but doing so on a Zoom screen with many small video feeds feels ineffective. Despite offers of additional one-on-one help, most students were too overwhelmed with everything to reach out for that additional support, which meant that students often had questions that went unanswered.

**Lack of ASL Zone.** Another challenge I noticed as an instructor, is when we take breaks during class online, students immediately turn off their cameras and go back to speaking in English with others in their environment. When they come back from break, it takes a few minutes for them to get back into the headspace of using ASL again. Students do not choose to hangout during break and chat with one another on the screen, so there is no incidental learning taking place during breaks like typically happens in face-to-face environments. This lack of an ASL Zone means there is a missed opportunity for language acquisition. Students report experiencing Zoom fatigue, so it is understandable that they need a break from the screen, but this does come at the expense opportunities for language practice.

**Interactions with ASL Faculty.** When asked about interaction with faculty after the shift to online learning, one student shared, “So, for me switching to ASL online, I had a super hard time with it...I feel like mentally I can't discuss or talk to my professor and explain what I'm struggling with...online, sending emails saying, ‘I am struggling with this and I don't understand this [topic]’.” Other students expressed similar feelings, stating that they knew their instructors were overwhelmed and so they did not want to burden them more with their questions and request additional support. Students reported feeling disconnected from their instructors, but explained that they believed instructors did the best they could during a really difficult time. One student shared,

I appreciate so much how the ASL faculty were able to transition classes to online and they were effective. We still learned things in class and the courses were adapted to an online situation as best you could in a week's notice, which was amazing. I had a couple of professors who just took their in-person syllabus and put it online and didn't really change anything, and it was really difficult. I struggled in those classes, but the ASL faculty really care about their students and learning and what they're teaching.

And I really appreciate the effort put into changing classes [to] online and making them work.

Another student added,

I think for me, the biggest thing was that the content of the class was changed so much that we lost all of the important information. And another hard thing was...[only doing] class once a week for clarification, instead of twice a week for two hours, we lost all that time. And another hard point was the classes were so big, that if the teacher was signing and say, a student was asking a question, you couldn't find the student. And if the teacher didn't repeat the question of the student, you had no idea what they asked. So you missed that too. So I don't think that the teachers failed, but I just think that it was tough. And if ASL was to be done online, there has to be changes made.

These reflections did not come as a surprise because, as instructors, we were facing similar issues with trying to make a 3D language clear on a 2D screen for new language learners. When we found a solution that worked for some students, like using breakout rooms, other students felt that approach was not an effective use of time. Without a clear evidence-based practice to base our decisions on, we worked to creatively try to reach students and meet their needs as best we could.

**Shift to E-curriculum.** During the focus groups, students brought up a collective frustration related to a change in curriculum. All of the students in the study completed ASL 1-8 with one specific curriculum that is designed for face-to-face instruction. When the ASL Studies team had to quickly change to an online delivery, we decided to switch to an online curriculum that was easier to implement. This shift was challenging for students because the structure was different, the language models were different, and the pedagogy used in that new curriculum was different than the curriculum they were accustomed to. One student stated,

I didn't know the signs they were using, and in a face-to-face environment, I would be like, "Whoa, wait. I don't recognize that sign." And then we'll discuss it. But then to do it online and be like, "oh, they were in section two, 30 minute 30 [seconds]" with stuff like...Being able to pull out which sign I didn't understand at that point. It just wasn't feasible for trying to learn [ASL]. And there was no opportunity for feedback, which might actually play into the emotional part of being in person versus online. There was just a total disconnect from any of my peers or instructors or

like... I don't know the people signing. And I just didn't care as much and didn't feel a need to put in any additional effort to what I was already doing.

This same sentiment was repeated by all nine participants in one way or another. The idea that the challenges were so substantial that any extra effort was simply not worth it was common throughout the sessions.

**Advantages of Online Learning.** I do want to note that there were a couple positive comments that students expressed about the shift to online learning. First, though physical isolation impacted feelings of social connection and mental health, some students found that there were fewer distractions and competing priorities, so they were able to adhere to a schedule better. One student stated,

There was [*sic*] no more friends spontaneously wanting to hang out. I could make a schedule and stick to that. And they'll allocate three hours to do one class and four hours to do another class. And it was helpful to be able to just block out schedules and know that there's not going to be any random interruptions that throw everything off. It was nice to have time to plan things and then plan relaxation and plan some [other] things as well and get all my work done. And teachers were a lot nicer on grading this term. It's [*sic*] the best grades that I've ever had.

Second, most of the students had at least some level of comfort with technology. While some technologies were new and had to be learned quickly, most students in this study were technology savvy and able to make the transition without major complications.

**Face-to-Face or Continued Online Learning.** When asked if students would prefer to take additional courses online or face-to-face, all nine students emphatically agreed that face-to-face courses were preferred. The second-best option would be to have two classes per week, one with live instruction and the second with pre-recorded videos they could watch and practice with during the week. Students acknowledged feeling worried about the impact that learning ASL online has on their ASL skills. Students shared feelings of anxiety and apprehension about declining language skills, and how that might make it more difficult to work with Deaf individuals or get into graduate programs that require language proficiency. These fears are not without substance, as reciprocal language opportunities are crucial for second language acquisition (Krashen, 1988).

### **Theme 3: Opportunities for Second Language Input and Output**

Traditionally, students who take ASL courses at WOU are immersed in the language and culture of the Deaf community. Starting with ASL 1, students enter into an ASL Zone that requires them to use ASL and refrain from using spoken language. This immersion extends beyond the classroom, with students often using ASL in the hall, in common areas, in the dorms, and at ASL community events. Students have plenty of access to native language models because all of the ASL instructors at WOU are Deaf and use ASL as their primary language. With so many students living and working near campus, it is not uncommon to find individuals at almost every restaurant, store, and coffee shop who know conversational ASL.

When WOU's campus closed due to COVID-19, so did all of the rich language immersion experiences that students depend on to learn and acquire ASL. While students were still able to take ASL online, that is not an equivalent experience to engaging face-to-face. According to Krashen's second language acquisition theory, students must have both direct instruction (learning) and incidental learning (acquisition) experiences to acquire language. As mentioned above, many students in this study found it difficult to engage in additional online meetings or opportunities to practice their language skills, because they were already experiencing Zoom fatigue just from completing their courses. Attending online ASL events was considered taxing, and most students did not make the effort to seek out opportunities to engage with native language models. One student explained,

It was a personal responsibility to seek out events...[and] I did not realize so many were online. But you don't know who is hosting, who is there. You don't know if they are native signers, if they are authentic, if they are hearing and lying that they are Deaf, you just don't know. And if they have wrong information, which I found a lot of people did not have the right information, it made me more uncomfortable. Because you did not know if it was worth going. I really enjoyed the [face-to-face] once a month WOU ASL community meetings because you knew people that were there. If you were talking to students, you knew their levels, you knew who the instructors were. So, it was easier and more comfortable knowing your environment.

Another student elaborated,

I don't know if it's so much the energy to go on to the Zoom calls [for these events], because even if I had the energy to do it, I'll still talk myself

out of it...It's the anxiety of not knowing what's going to happen, not knowing who's there, not knowing if I'll understand or if they'll understand me. I've also gotten myself into a routine of not going online and looking at my computer and just going to work, coming home, doing what I do. Brains like routine and my routine is not putting effort into going on to these different Zoom calls. Breaking out is something that I do need to do, but it's really hard for me right now.

Many students expressed the same experience, explaining that their limited energy was best reserved for their class work and simply surviving the pandemic. The addition of many unknowns served to increase anxiety, and students already expressed dealing with elevated levels of anxiety due to the transition. When asked about trying out some new online ASL events, one student commented,

[When on campus] walking through the hall and in our life, everybody's signing. And so you can just connect with those people. But online, my network was only people [who] I had taken an initiative to get their numbers or...[connect with]...online before we transferred [to remote learning] and then group chats...[were] set up and things like that. But even things I hear about like on Facebook, as a hearing student, I am not comfortable just inserting myself into a Deaf event and the Deaf community. And so in real life, I'd be [like], "Oh, some of my classmates are going. Oh, my teacher invited me. I will go with them." But just to be like, "Hey, I am here." I am not going to do that. So, I like—on the spectrum, I definitely just kind of pulled out on interacting with any Deaf people, rather than trying to figure out how.

Without engaging with native language models, students are unable to practice the skills they learn in class, and work toward fluency. As the students above mentioned, there are many opportunities available online, but most of these are panels of individuals, or Deaf people giving presentations. Students have an opportunity to practice their receptive ASL skills, but there are very few opportunities to practice reciprocal receptive and expressive language skills with native language users. The student's statement above about being sensitive to Deaf space is a really important consideration for students as they seek to continue to practice their skills, but do not want to invade a space meant for Deaf professionals or Deaf native language users only. It can be difficult to ascertain this distinction from workshop or community announcements, so students are often guessing whether their presence is appropriate at events.

A few students in this study shared that they were able to find ways to engage online because their teachers shared resources for them to research. These

students joined different events with their peers, which made them feel more comfortable and safe interacting with others they did not know. While students reported they had opportunities to practice their receptive skills, they felt that opportunities to practice their expressive skills outside of their online class were limited or non-existent. Most of the events they reported attending were live-streamed events that were open to the public and did not give them an opportunity to engage with the presenter or other audience members.

### **Discussion and Implications**

The research discussed in this paper occurred during spring term 2020. At that time, we were uncertain whether the whole 2020-2021 academic year would be offered online or if there would be an opportunity for face-to-face instruction. The decision was made to run the entire academic year online, with the hope that face-to-face instruction would resume fall of 2021.

When students shared their experiences during this study in spring 2020, they had only completed one term online and already were worried about the impacts of online learning on their receptive and expressive ASL skills. One student shared,

I definitely think there was an impact. I know when I took my RCD, [Rehabilitation Counseling for the Deaf] ASL test to get into the [masters] program, I feel like if I would have had ASL 9 in person, I would have acquired more vocab which could have helped my score. I think also the ASL grammar piece, I feel lost on that. And now, I know I'm going into this master's program hoping that my receptive skills are good enough to watch the lectures but more importantly, I'm worried about expressing myself to classmates and the instructor because I know my skills have declined so much.

This same feeling of discouragement was echoed by another student. She described her experience,

I feel like it did have an impact because—maybe this is me—but I do feel a lot more discouraged now learning ASL online just because of my declining skills. And I feel like I'm unable to express myself the way that I want to because of this decline. And I feel like if ASL was offered face-to-face, I'd feel a lot more confident because I can really work on that and really build up that confidence to use my skills.

The students who participated in this study were taking their final ASL core class, which means they had taken three years of ASL face-to-face. To invest three years into learning ASL, and then feel discouraged that the efforts they made to acquire the language were impacted by this one term is understandably disheartening.

Not all students were worried about the impact of the shift to online learning. Some commented that learning ASL 9 online was not too bad, because they already had eight other terms of face-to-face learning from which to draw. They explained that students taking more introductory ASL courses would likely struggle more, because they did not have enough experience face-to-face to be able to fill in the gaps that happened as a result of online learning. One student shared,

I definitely feel for some of the lower level ASL students. I remember taking ASL 6 and I loved learning the rules of the road and how to describe accidents with cars and bikes and stuff. Even though it doesn't seem like a super big thing, learning how to describe car accidents and bike accidents is a really big thing, especially for those about to do work in the Deaf community as interpreters, you have to learn how to use the classifiers. So, definitely a short-term effect, definitely worried about not having myself where I need to be...But in a way I do consider myself lucky that it was ASL 9 that I took online rather than ASL 3 or 6.

It would be interesting to research students taking lower levels of ASL, especially now that those students have completed an entire academic year taking ASL courses online, to learn more about their experiences with learning ASL online. It would also be interesting to follow up with the participants of this study to see if those who were worried about long- and short-term impacts on their language actually experienced struggles, and if those who did not feel like there would be a long-term impact would still support their assertion, one year later. I often wonder if their reflections would be different now, without access to Deaf events, immersion in ASL Zones or opportunities for face-to-face learning for more than a year.

Several students suggested the long- and short-term impacts would be less severe because they believed faculty would be understanding and help students get caught up. One student said, "I don't think it will be super bad for students in lower-level classes, because I will say, I feel WOU has awesome ASL professors who will jump right back into it and show them the ropes and show them how to increase...[or] develop their skills more". Another student reflected, "I don't know how this would impact students nationally, like other schools with signing

programs, but WOU has such a solid structure...the students will be fine. You guys take such good care of us, we'll be fine”.

I believe this is a really important consideration for instructors, because despite our best efforts to teach ASL online, we most likely will see gaps in students' learning across all levels. It is crucial to know that students are looking for us to extend grace as we prepare to go back to a face-to-face immersive environment fall of 2021. There has been a lot of flexibility granted due to online learning, but it will be important to remain flexible even after face-to-face instruction resumes, because students will need time to adjust.

Whether the shift to online learning will have a lasting impact on students' language learning and acquisition still remains to be seen. It is my hope that many ASL programs across the United States will research these phenomena and that we will begin to have a better understanding of how learning ASL online compares to face-to-face in terms of language acquisition and immersion in Deaf communities of practice.

### **Future Considerations**

One important thing to acknowledge is that even if classes are held face-to-face fall of 2021, there will still likely be mask requirements and social distancing mandates in place. With online learning, it is difficult for students to see grammatical structures that occur on the face, the space used around the body, and eye gaze and how it functions. These are just a few of the linguistic aspects of ASL that are difficult to capture online. If students and instructors are still using masks, the difficulties of online learning do not simply disappear when students come back face-to-face. Even if class is offered in person, masks cover the mouth and nose, both of which are important for ASL grammar. Additionally, the further people are apart, the harder it is to see eyebrow movements, eye gaze, fingerspelling, and many other components of the language.

Students will also still have less access to ASL Zones due to a slow reopening of restaurants, bars, coffee shops, and other venues where these events are typically held. If students are back to face-to-face learning, but still do not have immersion opportunities with multiple native language models, language acquisition will still be impacted. It will be essential not to assume that going back to face-to-face instruction will immediately solve all the problems that occurred in online learning.

It is vital to note that it will take time for programs, instructors, and students to find a new normal. This can be tricky for students who are beginning new graduate programs or professional careers. This can also cause hardships for the Deaf community, who rely on programs like those offered at WOU to train high quality professionals who are ready to serve the community. The purpose of

this article is not to say that only face-to-face programs are effective, or that all online programs are ineffective. Rather, this small study demonstrates that there are real barriers to ASL acquisition when taking courses online, and students' experiences suggest that more research is needed in how to address these barriers if face-to-face instruction is not an option.

## **Conclusion**

Second language acquisition necessitates opportunities for classroom learning and immersion in communities with native language models. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, almost all ASL courses at WOU were taught face-to-face. The shift to online learning brought many challenges for instructors and students. Navigating these challenges was not easy, but as we near the end of one year of online learning, still unsure of when programs will return to pre-pandemic operation, the question remains as to whether students' language proficiency will be impacted due to this shift.

According to students in this study, online learning is not a quality substitute for face-to-face instruction. Pivoting to online learning was a stopgap measure put into place due to the closing of campus and students stated they felt that instructors and programs did the best they could under the circumstances. If given the choice to choose between online learning and face-to-face instruction, all nine students agreed that face-to-face learning is the most effective for language acquisition, learning about Deaf culture, and immersion as a newcomer into the Deaf community.

As a second-generation Deaf woman, my sincere hope is that more research will be done on the impacts of the shift to online learning of ASL. My fear is that institutions across the country will use this recent shift to online learning to advocate for programs to remain fully online despite not knowing the possible consequences of that decision and its impact on language acquisition. Based on my experience, that decision would do a disservice to Deaf community members everywhere. Having the option to take ASL courses face-to-face is essential, and I hope additional research done by Deaf researchers will help demonstrate this need.

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