RESEARCH PROGRAM

Understanding the impact of knowing American Sign Language on thinking and learning in Deaf children.

My research has taken on two strands of work: a) researching the relationship between ASL and its influence on Deaf children's English reading skills and academic success, and b) the development of a web based ASL STEM vocabulary reference tool.

To investigate the relationship between language (ASL) in Deaf children and reading skills (English), I have been developing the American Sign Language Assessment Instrument (ASLAI), a measure of Deaf children’s knowledge of different linguistic structures in American Sign Language. The ASLAI is a team effort of Deaf and Hearing graduate students, faculty from the Department of Psychology and Deaf Studies. Deaf students from 4 to 18 years are being tested to obtain a robust and valid instrument for use in schools. The results will be used to study the potential of the ASLAI to identify developmental changes in ASL abilities as well as distinct profiles of learners who may be at risk for learning problems. It is our hope that this test will provide us with a much detail of ASL knowledge in Deaf children and this information will inform teaching. I continue to work in collaboration with the Learning Center for the Deaf (Framingham, MA) on all our projects.

My second research focus is the development of a Mathematics, Science and Technology vocabulary reference tool in American Sign Language. designed to easily accessed by Deaf students. The ASL vocabulary reference tool (ASLVRT) is internet based so that Deaf students and their teachers, interpreters, and other professionals will be able to look up how different concepts are signed in ASL. This project will provide both vocabulary and subject matter content in ASL. To make the ASLVRT easily accessible, we plan to develop a search process that does not require knowledge of English to locate information on a concept. This way, those who know the ASL vocabulary will be able to find the English print translation and vice versa. The website will contain ASL video of vocabulary, extended definition of the vocabulary in ASL and a pictorial representation of the concept.

Biographical Sketch

Dr. Robert Hoffmeister is a faculty member in the graduate programs in Literacy, Language and Culture and in Applied Linguistics. I received his Ph.D. from the University of Minnesota in psycholinguistics and education, and Masters degree from the University of Arizona and my undergraduate degree from the University of Connecticut. I have taught in residential, self-contained, and mainstream programs and was an administrator of a large metropolitan program serving Deaf children. I have been teaching at Boston University since 1979. My publications cover work in language acquisition (ASL), the influence of ASL on the development of English as a second language, the effects of attitudes on parents on the success of the Deaf child, and on hearing children of Deaf parents. Numerous articles have been published on ASL and education of the Deaf and I co-authored a text with Harlan Lane and Ben Bahan entitled “A Journey into the DEAF-WORLD.” My research and publications are focused on the improvement of language skills in Deaf children.