American Sign Language

Hearing loss is a partial or total inability to hear. It affects about a billion people on earth. Around a hundred million of these are completely deaf and require special ways of communicating. One of these ways is sign language. Sign language is a language that uses hand gestures that are modified by facial expressions. Hand gestures are mainly used for words, while most grammar comes from facial expressions. American Sign Language or ASL is a language used by the Deaf community in the USA.

ASL is surrounded by a lot of myths and misconceptions. One of the most common myths is that it is simply a visual code for English and not a real language. In fact, ASL and English are two completely separate languages, each with their own grammar. Although ASL does sometimes use fingerspelling, when each letter of a word is spelled out by a particular gesture, it is mostly used for names. Another popular misconception is that ASL is a universal language understood by all signers in the world. Actually, there are hundreds of sign languages, all naturally developed by the Deaf communities in different countries.

It is interesting that ASL is specific to the USA, while other Englishspeaking countries, such as the UK or Australia have their own sign languages. In a way, due to its history, ASL is closer to French Sign Language than it is to British Sign Language.

The origins of ASL can be traced back to a couple of influences. In the 1600s the first regional sign languages naturally developed in the American colonies. They appeared in places like Martha's Vineyard, where a large number of deaf people happened to be part of the community. Another major influence was French Sign Language. In 1817 Laurent Clerc, a deaf teacher from France, and Thomas Gallaudet, a hearing American educator, founded the first American school for the deaf in Hartford, Connecticut. The blending of regional sign language and French Sign Language formed the basis of ASL today.

In the 19th century ASL flourished through Deaf schools, which had great success utilizing a combination of ASL and written English. However, a change in Deaf education occurred in 1880 that is still affecting the Deaf community today. In the 2nd International Congress on Deaf Education that met in Milan and where no deaf people were allowed to participate in the discussion of sign language, the majority voted in favor of oral education for all deaf children. This meant teaching them to read lips and imitate speech. It was believed that the exaggerated facial expressions, which include movements of eyes, eyebrows, mouth, tongue and lips and are part of any sign language, were unpleasant to hearing people and could even horrify them. In addition, sign languages were thought to have no grammar.

In the following 40 years over 80% of the Deaf schools in the USA, as well as in many other countries, switched to an oral method of instruction. This became known as "the dark ages for Deaf education in America". The number of deaf teachers in the schools dropped significantly, as they were considered inferior, unable to teach the children speech. Students were not allowed to use ASL during the lessons. Fortunately, the children in these schools still used ASL between and after classes to exchange information and just talk to each other. The effectiveness of the oral approach remained a contentious issue for the next century and a half, with a resurgence of ASL in the 1960s.

Deaf education in the USA began about...

1. ...400 years ago.
2. ...300 years ago.
3. ...200 years ago.
4. ...100 years ago.