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# Teaching Irish Sign Language in Contact Zones: An Autoethnography

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## Teaching Irish Sign Language in Contact Zones: An Autoethnography

### Abstract

The central purpose of this autoethnographic study is to provide an account of my experiences as a deaf teacher teaching Irish Sign Language (ISL) to hearing students in a higher education institution. My cultural and linguistic background and personal history guided the way I interacted with students who found themselves confronted by a unique culture quite separate from what they had known before. By engaging in autoethnographic journal writing recorded over a period of three months, I reveal the complex social and historical relations manifested in the contact between deaf and hearing cultures in the classroom. More specifically, I consider how language conflict and different communication modes might affect teaching and learning in concrete situations. In particular, I advocate an understanding of Pratt's (1991) "contact zone" theory to see deaf-hearing contacts not just as challenges but possibilities for new ways of understanding the experience of sign language teaching and learning.

### Keywords

Autoethnography, Deaf and Hearing Identities, Sign Language, Contact Zones

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## Teaching Irish Sign Language in Contact Zones: An Autoethnography

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*The central purpose of this autoethnographic study is to provide an account of my experiences as a deaf teacher teaching Irish Sign Language (ISL) to hearing students in a higher education institution. My cultural and linguistic background and personal history guided the way I interacted with students who found themselves confronted by a unique culture quite separate from what they had known before. By engaging in autoethnographic journal writing recorded over a period of three months, I reveal the complex social and historical relations manifested in the contact between deaf and hearing cultures in the classroom. More specifically, I consider how language conflict and different communication modes might affect teaching and learning in concrete situations. In particular, I advocate an understanding of Pratt's (1991) "contact zone" theory to see deaf-hearing contacts not just as challenges but possibilities for new ways of understanding the experience of sign language teaching and learning. Key Words: Autoethnography, Deaf and Hearing Identities, Sign Language, Contact Zones*

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### Prologue

*September 7, 2015. It is mid-afternoon. I see so many eyes, hands and faces, so many mouths, their lips moving with secret meanings. I know little of what they're saying. Hearing students – they know their teacher is deaf but their facial expression tells me nothing of how they feel...the first class of the semester and they're talking among themselves. I've never met them before. I notice chairs lined in neat rows, not ideal for teaching this class. I write on the white board: IRISH SIGN LANGUAGE and, with the thrust of my hands in the air, I beckon them to move the chairs back against the wall. The language they are about to learn can only be seen, not heard. When students rise to full height, there is some prodding and shoving until a semi-circle is formed and I'm the only person left standing. I greet them by sticking my thumb up, an automatic reflex action that momentarily makes them take notice their teacher is deaf. Thumbs up? It's a behavioral norm that deaf people do when greeting others. What will they think of me now? Already I feel a little uncomfortable so I start by doing a number count: 28 students, mostly female, all of them are seated on grey fabric chairs with wooden writing tablets. They're aged somewhere between 20 and 25 years, third year students doing a Bachelor of Education degree course. I'm a teacher, more than twice their age, also doing autoethnographic research. I reach for my jacket, take out my mobile phone and make a show of switching off the phone. The students follow suit. Then I move towards the door and turn on the switch. The overhead light comes on, white and bright. I step back to the board, write my name and begin class.*

The above extract is an exemplar of intercultural, bilingual and audiological relations between a native Irish Sign Language (ISL) teacher and nonnative ISL students. The narrative

illustrates how deaf and hearing cultures meet in the classroom where dialogue is mediated through ISL. The interaction between the two paradigms involves shifting selves, cross-cultural encounters and bilingual negotiations. Hearing students confront a unique language that is quite outside the boundaries of their life experience. In the above scene, I am about to teach hearing students a visual language which can be communicated through the orientation and movement of the body through which thoughts and emotions are expressed (Leeson & Saaed, 2012). The course is based on a module I designed and developed, not in isolation but within a Bachelor of Education program for primary teacher students. The course was informed by the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for languages and university requirements for assessment. The aim was to teach ISL at A1 level and focus on students learning productive (expressive), receptive (reading) and interactive ISL skills. The ISL curriculum followed themes laid out in the CEFR guidelines. Sadlier et al. (2012) promotes CEFR as an important tool in shaping the quality of teaching and learning ISL in higher education.

The rationale for this study is to address two empirically separate but interrelated questions: How does the presence of a *deaf* teacher and *hearing* students produce a specific classroom environment? What happens when deaf and hearing cultures meet, collide and intersect in a sign language classroom? My answers to these questions take up, in turn, the following topics: (1) personal stories concerning my experience of teaching ISL in “contact zone” (Pratt, 1991) situations; (2) understanding autoethnography and journal writing; (3) my reflections on sign language teaching experiences and implications for doing autoethnography.

### **Contact Zones: Meaning and Context**

In searching for theoretical context that advance understanding of sign language teaching, I use Pratt’s (1991, p. 34) concept of “contact zone,” the “in-between space” (Bhabha, 1994) where “cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other” in asymmetrical ways. Platt (1992, p. 7) coined the term to “invoke the special and temporal correspondence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctives, and whose trajectories now intersect.” While her main interest lies in travel accounts and historical texts, Clifford (1997, p. 204) extends the concept to include “cultural tensions within the same state, region or city.” When viewed in this light, the classroom represents the focal point of “cultural tensions” caused by a meeting of deaf and hearing cultures. The intersectionality of two opposing but interrelated cultures is articulated in this study through autoethnography, “an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739). While Pratt (1992) sees the term as a literary genre of contact zone phenomenon, autoethnography is often constructed as layered accounts integrating personal stories with ethnography, theory, analysis and self-reflexive texts (Ronai, 1995).

### **Autoethnography**

Given the dialectical relationship between deaf teacher and hearing students is one based in a cultural conflict of identity, autoethnography is an apt method of research for this study. To engage in autoethnography is to acknowledge how and why identities matter in qualitative research concerning socio-cultural-historical phenomenon (Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis, 2015, p. 19). According to Ellis (2004), autoethnography, as a method of research, seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno) (Ellis, 2004). *Autoethnography* may well be explained by its distinction from *autobiography*. The writing of an autobiography involves “a process of recreating, re-viewing and making sense of the biographic past” (Alexander, 1999, p. 309)

based on the author's retrospective account about his or her life (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). Accordingly, autobiographers may write in the form of "showing," using the literary conventions of characterization, scene-setting, plot development and dialogue intended to "bring readers into the thoughts, feelings, emotions and actions" in the story (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 4). Furthermore, autobiography may be written in the mode of "telling" where the author describes an event in a more abstract way to create and maintain emotional distance from the work.

Similarly, *autoethnographers* write in the mode of "showing" using the same literary conventions used by autobiographers which allow readers get a sense of "being there" in the moment with the author going through an experience and "being here" in the text (Spry, 2001). By contrast, the hybridity of *auto* and *ethnography* means researchers make cultural and personal experience accessible and meaningful by using a systematic approach to analyzing and interpreting social-cultural understandings of self in relation to others. Autoethnographers use journals, photographs, letters and newspaper articles to help test their memory of a particular event (Muncey, 2010). The systematic approach to combining personal stories, ethnographic writing, analysis, theory and research is what sets autoethnography apart from autobiography.

In making personal and cultural experience meaningful and accessible to a wider audience, autoethnographers produce "evocative or emotional" stories (Denzin, 2014) and engage in "creative analytical practice" (Richardson, 1999, p. 660). Evocative nature of autoethnography has been criticised by Anderson (2006) for using emotion in qualitative research. Reflecting on his personal experience of family, work and sports skydiving, Anderson proposes autoethnographers take the analytical approach using systematic ethnographic methods to seek answers to questions about social life. Analytic autoethnography involves the researcher being (1) self-identified as a full member of the cultural group or community under study; (2) made visible as a member in the researcher's published text; and (3) committed to an analytical approach to enhancing theoretical understandings of social phenomenon and "objective" writing and analysis of a social or cultural group under study.

Responding to criticism, Ellis and Bochner (2006, p. 431) find autoethnographers using the analytical approach often fail to move the reader, causing them to become "a detached spectator [...] cut off from [...] body and emotions [with] no personal story" to engage them. On the basis that I aim to "extend ethnography to include the heart, the autobiographical and the artistic text" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 745), evocative autoethnography is an apt term of choice for this study. This is because my personal stories draw upon aspects of lived experiences that are deeply personal, emotional and intimate. The stories are constructed as "present-tense vignettes" (Humphreys, 2005), using literary conventions that make emotional experience accessible in the text. I produce a form of writing that illuminate the visual in hand shapes, facial expression and body movement. The intention is to invoke in readers a sense of verisimilitude, that the experience is lifelike on the page, that they are actually seeing sign language in action in various contact zone situations. Details of how the stories were selected, generated, processes, analyzed, and presented are outlined in the journal writing section of this paper.

Autoethnography has rarely featured in deaf studies research. In recent times, a number of autoethnographies authored by deaf people have emerged (McIllroy & Storbeck, 2011; Valente, 2012; O'Connell, 2016) but none of these accounts focus on sign language teaching. Most of the literature on the subject is mainly concerned with teaching ASL as a foreign language (Cross, 1977), teaching practice (Willoughby, Linder, Ellis, & Fisher, 2015), professional training of sign language teachers (Kanda & Fleischer, 1988; Newell, 1994), developing and implementing sign language programs (Cooper, Reisman, & Watson, 2011) and teaching sign language to international deaf students (Roth, 1993). The difference between

this article and these published accounts is that it engages in autoethnography by placing the experience of a deaf sign language teacher at the forefront of analysis.

### **My Life in Sign Language**

I was born *hearing*, the oldest of my parents' four children. In 1967, at the age of four years, I lost my hearing and became the only *deaf* child in the family. A year later, I was sent to an all-boys residential school. For most of my childhood, I lived away from home in a secluded spot and surrounded by high walls. Within this enclave, I learned the only practical way to discover the world around me was through my hands and eyes. I met deaf children for the first time. Through socializing with them, I learned sign language despite school policy forbidding us to communicate in the language. Sign language was outlawed and language offenders physically punished. The school authorities had no knowledge of the language. With no adult role models to relate to, we formed peer friendships and covertly shared stories through signs. Sometimes this took place in the dormitory during the night when we used flash lights to *see* our hands and faces.

Sign language was a way of life for me. I was able to describe situations, memories, circumstances and actions by the shape and movement of my hands and body. We christened ourselves with sign-names. I have been assigned two names, one in English and the other in ISL. Sign-names are quite common in the deaf world (Day & Sutton-Spence, 2010). I found it difficult to remember adults' English names. English names were often uttered rather than written down on paper and they rarely registered with me because spoken words could not tie a knot in my brain. In the classroom, we were subjected to the dictates of our teacher who was hostile towards sign language.

After leaving school in the early 1980s, I socialized with the sign language community in Dublin. Being surrounded by hearing people at work on a daily basis, it was natural for me to join the deaf club center to meet deaf people. In the premises a number of sign language classes were provided for hearing adult students. ISL was a "passport" for "entry" into the community – a "gateway" to meeting and socializing with deaf people. Whether by accident or design, ISL was a pathway to a career in sign language interpreting and towards the top level of an internal hierarchy to the management and directorship of deaf studies programs in higher education institutions (O'Brien & Emery, 2014; Sutton-Spence & West, 2011).

In my experience, ISL was often a target for hostility, derision and prejudicial attitudes from the public. This was particularly prominent in Irish society during the 1980s when people threw disapproving looks at us and performed mock imitations of hand movements. There was something demoralizing about this dim antagonism. In the face of this mean-spiritedness, I found it difficult to openly share the joy, the beauty and the fun of deaf culture. One day, I was deep in conversation with another deaf person when, out of the corner of my eye, I saw a number of people standing on the pavement staring at us from across the street. When I turned to look at them their eyes averted quickly. A few years later, I was signing to another deaf man on the street when an elderly lady came over to us. She screwed her eyes and mouthed the following words: "What are

you doing with your hands? Stop!” I was able to see through her ignorance and responded to such infantile behavior with an indulgent smile. I carried on signing with my friend. However, these incidents stayed with me for a long time. When I started teaching ISL, such memories sometimes resurfaced at an unconscious level and trigger emotional responses to the classroom interaction.

After I graduated in 2002 with a primary degree in English literature from the University of Ulster in Northern Ireland, I made use of the experience of sign language to undertake a postgraduate degree in literature specializing in postcolonial literature and cultural politics at University of Edinburgh. A year later, in 2003, I took a leap into social science research for the Master of Philosophy in Deaf Studies at University of Bristol in England. There I found myself attracted by the lure of doing ethnographic research. When I graduated in 2008, I was armed with knowledge of the works of international authors on sign languages and experienced a renewed sense of pride in deaf culture.

Upon my return to Ireland, I embarked on a PhD in education (sociology). The title of my doctoral thesis was “A critical auto ethnographic study of deaf people’s experiences of education” (O’Connell, 2013). I launched into the research realizing my role as researcher was that of a “complete membership” which means being part of the cultural group under study (Adler and Adler 1994, p. 380). The participants attended the same schools and we were part of the same sign language community. While I interviewed them their stories elicited emotions in me and had a profound effect on how I saw myself as an autoethnographer.

### **Irish Sign Language**

The languages in contact in the Irish deaf community are English and ISL and both stem from my life associations with deaf and hearing people. There is a contrastive historical expression between depictions of ISL as “crude gestures,” “spontaneous dramatization,” “mimicry,” and “body language” (Griffey, 1994, p. 24) versus descriptions of ISL as a “natural human language” (Leeson & Saaed, 2012, p. 1) in the same sense that English and Irish are independent human languages.

Historically, ISL was referred to simply as “sign language” which implied the presence of some kind of structure and order. Despite this inference, no written account appears to be available that would help shed light into its historical roots. This would have necessitated the search for primary evidence, quite a difficult undertaking given the lack of available evidence on its origin and evolution (O’Connell, 2015). As Leeson and Saaed (2012, p. 1) noted, “there is little documentation available to us to support any meaningful recreation of what that language looked like.” However, we may ascertain from the writings of Aristotle and Socrates that deaf people have been numerous enough to develop a sign language anywhere around the world (Power, 2006). Baynton (1996), for example, argues that deaf people’s innate ability to develop a sign language among themselves stem from their mastery at seeing with their eyes and communicating with their hands. Their predisposition to use manual and visual features means they’d been developing sign languages for centuries.

In Ireland, long before the first deaf school was opened in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, sign language was probably known amongst the deaf population but hardly in a consistent way as English or Irish was extensively understood in the country at the time. However, enough evidence exists to suggest that high levels of sign language were used in schools for deaf

children (McDonnell & Saunders, 1993; O'Connell, 2015; O'Connell & Deegan, 2014). While no one thought it important enough to keep a record of its development, ISL was inherited from previous generations of deaf people and transmitted to the next generation. The force of this cultural life was made known in the mid-nineteenth century when Catholic and Protestant community members began to take an interest in the education of deaf children (O'Connell, 2015). They implemented a language program modelled on the system employed by Le Bon Sauever school for deaf children in Caen in France. Deaf children passed on their knowledge of sign language as a language inheritance for many years. The children were taught literacy through sign language so that they would be educated enough to understand religious concepts and receive the sacrament of the church. From the very beginning, the schools built a sign language tradition, conducting classes in signs, finger-spelling and written English. Students learned the sign alphabet from a wall chart displaying hand shapes, words and pictures. Sign alphabets were tied to learning religious words and eventually students were educated enough to understand the sacraments.

It is difficult to say with any degree of certainty when precisely ISL was relegated to the margins but change in school policy was under way in the late 1940s. Sometime between 1946 and 1948, oralism was introduced as a new policy emphasizing exclusively spoken language communication and speech and listening skills (Griffey, 1994). The integrationist approach was promoted as the best policy in consequence of the decision of the Intentional Congress of the Education of the Deaf held in Milan, Italy in 1880. The congress called for the prohibition of sign languages in schools throughout the world (Lane, 1992). The general consensus was sign language caused isolation and disrupted speech development. When ISL was gradually replaced by the English language, school resources were diverted towards modern technology with the availability of new hearing aids and audio equipment.

In the 1960s, sign languages experienced something of a revival with the pioneering work of William Stokoe endorsing American Sign Language (ASL) as a language with all the linguistic features required for human languages. Over ten years later, in the mid-1970s, Mary Brennan gave similar support to British Sign Language (Brennan, 1976). Both Brennan and Stokoe's research raised the linguistic status of sign languages giving them symbolic respect and prestige and, at the same time, challenging dominant notions of sign languages.

In Ireland, early efforts to standardize ISL produced a dictionary combining existing signs with new signs developed by a committee spearheaded by a group of hearing people (Leeson & Saaed, 2012). The booklet gave the language its new title, "Irislan," much to the chagrin of deaf leaders who felt the project should have been accomplished by deaf people without the control and direction of hearing people. In the 1990s, ISL began to profit from a number of linguistic studies documented in master's and doctoral dissertations (Burns, 1995; LeMaster, 1990; Leeson, 2002). The first of these scholarly activities was Le Masters' (1990) seminal doctoral study on the presence of gendered variations of ISL. At around this time, ISL was ascribed a national identity with the term "Irish" applied to the term. LeMasters' work provided the impetus for researchers to conduct a series of linguistic research on ISL throughout the 1990s and early 21<sup>st</sup> century (Grehan, 2008).

Leeson and Saaed (2012) offer some details on social and historical developments of ISL. Authored by hearing linguists and, paradoxically one author fluent in ISL, the book focuses mainly the phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics and pragmatics of ISL. A welcome addition to ISL literature, the book uncovers aspects of sign-linguistics with detailed illustrations of how ISL is grammatically structured and organized according to principles contained in all human languages. The authors state that ISL exhibits independent linguistic patterns that make it distinct from English and can be used to discuss any topic from the simple and concrete to the lofty and abstract. As a visual language, ISL is expressed through body movement involving the hands and face to convey meaning. Arising from linguistic contact,



characteristics of the English language have been “borrowed” into ISL. A clear example of this inflection is the sign alphabet expressed through “finger spelling” which has been an ever-present linguistic component in ISL since the nineteenth century.

In the decade of the 1980s, a sense of “deaf nationalism” (Ladd, 2003) permeated the ISL community in the form of a longstanding political campaign to promote and preserve their language heritage. The seed of this movement was already sown in 1981, the year the Irish Deaf Society (IDS) was founded by a group of deaf activists. In 1988, Irish Member of European Parliament (MEP), Eileen Lemass, called for the recognition of all signed languages in Europe including ISL. Ten years later, in 1998, a prominent government minister incorrectly declared that more than one sign language was present in the country. The comment on the plurality of ISL considerably weakened the position of the campaigners. A similar fate occurred in 2013. After successful campaign gained support from almost every County Council member, a single comment from the Minister for Justice and Law Reform that no services were available to deaf people defeated the motion. Consequently, ISL remain amongst the three national signed languages in Europe without official state recognition.

### **Research on Sign Language Teaching**

Although ISL teacher training programs have been in operation at the Centre for Deaf Studies, Trinity College Dublin, there is a particular dearth of research published on the ISL teaching phenomenon (Sadlier et al., 2012). This information deficit necessitates a review of international research on sign language teaching which has been prolific in the United States, Australia and New Zealand in recent times (Willoughby et al., 2015). Sign language teaching developed as a profession in the United States in the early 1970s. At this time, linguists had already validated American Sign Language (ASL) as a human language and ASL teaching was standardized in teacher training courses with students assessed in accreditation exams (Newell, 1994). Consequently, many ASL teachers attained the status of qualified foreign or second language teachers.

A number of published accounts examining the challenges facing students provide valuable insight that benefit sign language teachers. McKee and McKee (1992), for example, report persistent problems occur in reading ASL fingerspelling. The authors note that hearing students typically arrive in class without experience of processing orthographic configurations. The lack of early input and regular practice mitigates against learning to decode fingerspelling. Krausneker's (2015) study of language attitudes reveal the extent to which hearing people struggle to imagine how sign language grammar is structured. He reminds us that doubt regarding the linguistic status prevailed in mainstream societies for centuries. This observation extends to the contemporary where “widespread misunderstandings, misconceptions, and misinterpretations of sign languages still remain” (p. 416). In their analysis of minority language attitudes, Burns, Matthews, and Nolan-Conroy (2001, p. 182) argue that “opinions about languages...reflect our views about those who use them and the contexts and functions with which they are associated” (Burns et al., 2001, p. 182). One of the critical features of their theories focuses on societal views about ISL and its users. The authors noted that sign languages are often targets of prejudice because of their associations with deaf people.

Most of the available literature on sign language teaching focus on teaching standards (Jacobowitz, 2005), teaching practice and pedagogy (Newell, 1995; Smith & Ramsey, 2004), program structuring (Cooper, Reisman, & Watson, 2011) and promoting awareness of the phonological, lexical, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic aspects of sign language (Lupton & Zelaznik, 1990; Rosen, 2010; Quinto-Pozos, 2011; Willoughby, 2015). Despite the significant corpus of literature dealing with teaching sign language, little research exist that reveal the self-conscious reflections of sign language teachers. This means the “voices” of sign language

teachers have, until now, been largely absent from the literature. In that context, I make my experience of teaching visible by presenting personal stories and my own reflections that help “create a reciprocal relationship with audiences in order to compel a response” (Denzin, 2014, p. 20). In other words, readers gain the opportunity to relate their experiences with mine, consider how they might do research on their teaching practice and initiate dialogue that resonate with the challenges of negotiating contact zone experiences.

### Journal Writing and Personal Stories

Journal writing which is central component of this autoethnographic research is based on my teaching experience throughout the autumn semester from Monday 7<sup>th</sup> September to 8<sup>th</sup> December 2015. I adopted the first person style of writing using the pronoun “I” to tell my story and combine myself as teacher and author into a shared experience. The writing focused on my thoughts, memories and emotions generated from the experience in chronological, episodic sequence of events that occurred in class. They were jotted down immediately after class in a café within a short driving distance away from campus. Every detail memorized including room setting, signed conversations, discussions and dialogue, interactions were duly noted in the journal. First, I wrote them as a straight-forward narrative. This laid the groundwork for the construction of present-tense “snapshot stories.” From these notes, I wrote stories using the literary contentions described earlier. It was written in such a way as to give readers the cinematic experience of being “there” in the classroom and “here” in the text (Spry, 2001).

Ellis’ (2004) “thematic analysis” approach serves as the one for the present work which affords a degree of flexibility for identifying, analysing, and reporting thematic patterns within stories. The analytical process involved regular close reading, asking questions of specific stories: *What am I doing? What are they doing? Why did this happen? What is the meaning of what they said? How did I respond? How did I feel? What should I have done? How do I feel now?* The answers were jotted down alongside the stories and, from these responses, emerged a range of different themes that highlight examples of contact zone encounters. They were subsequently tested against students’ comments from the feedback questionnaire and classroom interaction to ensure closeness and maximum exactness were maintained. The themes are categorized as follows: (1) Recognizing deaf and hearing identities in audiological contact zones; and (2) Linking teaching and learning in linguistic contact zones.

#### *Theme 1: Recognizing deaf and hearing identities in audiological contact zones*

*September 28, 2016. Room 201 is on the second floor, small and square shaped with light blue walls. I sign automatically, my hands cutting through air. I point my finger at my eye. They’re watching attentively. I curl my forefinger and tap against my chin. Then I brush my fingers against the palm of the other hand.*

*“When did you become HEARING?”*

*I slowly fingerspell H-E-A-R-I-N-G. When did you become hearing? Confusion spread across their faces. Squinting their eyes at my hands, they turn to look at others and shake their heads. I repeat the sign, curling my fore finger and tapping it against my chin between the jaw and mouth. HEARING. I’m trying to let them know they have a hearing identity. This has to be explained in ISL. It takes the students a moment to respond. When? Yes, when. Finger spell: W-H-E-N. Their heads turn right and left in search of support. What if they don’t to understand what I’m trying to tell them? I’m not doing a good job of it. Must resist all temptation to write in English. Try to improvise. ISL, no English. I*

repeat the sign and fingerspell HEARING. A flicker of recognition lights up their faces. Yes, that's it. HEARING. When did you become hearing? One student looks at me, her face brightening, and she waves and signs hesitantly.

"Born...hearing...yes?"

"Okay. Anyone?"

Another student nods but refrains from signing to me. She's sitting on my right at the end of the semi-circle, looking at me intently. I tell the class to think about why they are being identified. At the same time, I'm teaching them how to sign HEARING. I repeat the sign, then, touch my ear with my forefinger. HEAR. Sign verb for "can hear." I touch my ear again, this time with forefinger and index finger closed together. DEAF. I point a finger at my chest and repeat the sign. I'm DEAF.

"Okay?"

A few students are nodding their heads. No one is signing. I spread my arms wide and search their faces.

"Well? What's this sign?"

I curl my forefinger and tap my chin.

Another student fingerspells the word. H-E-A-R-I-N-G.

"Yes, that's right. Your identity."

I make the sign for 'identity.' "Okay, what's my identity?"

A student sitting on my left raises her hand slightly and I turn to her. She points at her ear.

"H-E-A-R?"

"No. D-E-A-F."

I correct her. "This is the sign..." I touch my ear with my forefinger and index finger closed together. DEAF.

I've just given them an identity they never knew they had before they first came to class by displaying it with my hands. They now know they are hearing. Perhaps they think it foreign to be called hearing people. I tell my students that's what deaf people say about people who hear. If I pointed this out to people on the street, they'd think I'm mad.

"Have you been told this before? You're HEARING?"

A few students shake their heads. "No."

"When did you become HEARING?"

"Always hearing?"

"Not really" I say. "Before now you didn't know, right? Now you have a identity. Right?"

"Yes...new?"

"No" I say. "You meet deaf people, then you know you're HEARING. Yes?"

I've been testing students' ability to hold a conversation in basic ISL and raised awareness of our distinct identities.

I sign: "See you next week."

They all rise from their chairs, signing thanks, and go out the door. I can't help smiling. The screen behind me is glowing white and I switch off the light. The room grows dim, filled with grey morning light. I'm surprised at having been able to carry on this morning. Without feeling apprehensive. As if everything is just the same in Room 201.

A salient theme emerging in this story is the sense of “hearingness,” the experience of hearing sound, best exemplified by the recognition of students’ hearing identity. I was instrumental in bringing students into audiological contact zones making them consciously aware of their identity as being constructed in the presence of a deaf teacher. Though their conceptualizations of hearingness is qualified for being *hearing*, the students were unable to realize their identity until they entered a “DEAF space” (Gulliver, 2009) and encountered deaf culture. This “DEAF space” is not necessarily physical but temporary where learning sign language takes places for a short time (Gulliver & Kitzel, 2016). The space exists in the disjuncture between deaf and hearing identities. The point of disjuncture, according to Bauman (2005, p. 314), emerges “only within the contact zone between hearing and deaf worlds, between auditory and visual modalities.” The auditory and visual contact zones provide valuable opportunities for learning not just ISL but also about others, sharing and overcoming language barriers, dealing with confusion, concerns, fears and conflicts in the classroom and knowing how they become embedded in our respective cultures.

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*At 9am on Friday, September 25, I find myself standing before class. I remain in constant touch with my memory of driving into campus in the rain. All that can be seen through the window is grey rain dripping on window panes. Room light has dimmed by the dense cloud that descended this morning. I’m conscious of the slight uneasiness I caused in my students for being too rigid in my teaching. No cause for alarm though. By means of an ice-breaker, I start telling them about my morning, driving in the rain, being stuck in traffic, waiting for the way to clear before driving on. Everything is going well. I find myself suspended in animated verve sharing my story in ISL. Just when I’m in the middle of it, a girl raises her hand, points to the exit and imitates someone knocking on the door. A familiar feeling of powerlessness comes over me as I make my way to the door. Not only am I deaf, disabled, handicapped, constricted, deprived of hearing but I am also exposed, made visible but ultimately laid bare. No fault of the student. Such moments are often personal, recalling present and past experiences. As I go across the floor, the door and a lady enters the room and hands me a large brown envelope. She smiles and closes the door after her. I open the envelope and quickly scan the letter before returning to class.*

\*

It is clear from the story that the student, in calling attention to the visitor at the door, showed some understanding of audiological identities. What emerged in this contact zone situation is not that I experienced “disability” in the classroom but rather the recognition that the student’s act was a sincere attempt to acknowledge a person’s identity. In situations where hearing people understand that deaf people face significant challenges related to their deafness, they have the potential to provide accessible facilities to enable them lead independent lives. The point about being denied access to facilities resonate with Oliver (1990) and Shakespeare’s (2006) critique of how societal practices and policies often fail to take into account the needs of people with disabilities. Bauman (2005, p. 314) put it succinctly when he pointed out that it is “only in the hearing/deaf contact zone where the site of disability emerges.”

Whatever about problems arising from societal practices and policies, my experience of “disability” was a personal one, something that belonged to me and no one else. I owned the

experience and being deaf most of my life means I've never known any different. Some things like hearing and understanding people's speech continue to elude me but I've managed to work out my own communication systems. For me, being deaf is not a disability but a socio-cultural construct ingrained in the experience of sign language and "Deafhood" (Ladd, 2003). It has always been interesting to live life in this way. So, my concern was not to hatch into experiences of feeling "deprived," "powerless," "handicapped," or "disabled" but to remove all internal negative thoughts and restore my foundational beliefs about the value of having a deaf identity.

*Theme 2: Linking teaching and learning in linguistic contact zones*

*I point to the window and make a flapping motion with my hands. "It's raining outside," I say. "Yes or no?"*

*Some students nod their heads.*

*"Yes or no?"*

*They're looking at each other. Their lips are moving. With my gaze on them, I repeat the signs for "yes" and "no." Some students sign "yes" when they mean "no." One student imitates my hand movement.*

*She says: "Yes...cold outside."*

*"Good"*

*"This morning..."*

*The students copies my signs. "I travelled... what?"*

*"Travel?"*

*"Yes, by car... Okay?"*

*"Yes. C-A-R"*

*"Okay."*

*I perform the act of holding the steering wheel (driving) and flap my hands (raining). I stick up my forefingers and do an imitation of the windscreen wipers going zig zag. The students squint at me, and laugh, and I laugh with them. They seem to enjoy watching "drama" unfold in ISL.*

*"It's raining" I sign "Okay...driving."*

*I put my forefinger on my chin, then, stick up eight fingers. Their heads turn towards each other. Some are mouthing "What?" "What is he saying?" Their lips are moving, eye darting left and right, from me to students and back. Their mouths are opening and closing.*

*One student signs. "Half eight?"*

*"Yes, that's good."*

*I "rewind" by going back in time, repeating the story of driving in the rain. I indicate that I parked my car at the campus car park. I do a mime of opening and closing the door and pressing the lock on the car key. My hand shapes tell them that my clothes were drenched. Soaking wet, I say.*

*"What am I telling you?"*

*"You..."*

*"Walking? Rain?"*

*"Yes, what else?"*

*"What?"*

*"Clothes? Wet?"*

*Another student jumps in. "What's that sign?"*

*"Wet. Wet clothes. You see? Do this."*

*"Yes."*

*They squint at my hands. I keep moving my hands slowly and repeat the story. I make sure the orientations in hand movement are clear and visible. When I stop, I ask a question.*

*“What did I say?”*

*“Driving?”*

*“That’s right.”*

*“Morning?”*

*“Yes.”*

*“Traffic jam?” A black haired girl wearing black pants and a red top signs. She places one hand behind the other palm facing sideways and the hands move forward in slow motion.*

*“Yes. That’s right” I say, pleased that she has learned to grasp the idea of using dramatization to explain the part of being in a traffic jam.*

*I repeat the story and wait for their response.*

*“Raining?” the girl in green top finger spells W-I-P-E-R.*

*“Yes, but what’s the sign for W-I-P-E-R?”*

*I ask her to imitate the sign for wiper. There is laughter amongst the students. They find it funny putting two forefingers up in the air and going zig zag. I laugh with them.*

\*

I think the most intriguing part of this story is the ISL storytelling. This allows student to become accustomed to reading signs in action. There was a contact zone in which both ISL and English complemented one another in the teaching and learning experience. While ISL was the language being taught, learning it developed along English lines to the detriment of students’ learning experience. I noted how their “heads turn towards each other” and why they keep “mouthing” words. I believe that in consulting with others through spoken language, they are not benefitting from the learning experience.

\*

*September 14<sup>th</sup>, 2016. It is 4.30 pm now. Through the break in the blind at the window, a glow of sunshine filters inside the classroom. I linger over every sign for time: how to sign half past four. The students glance at their watch and raise their hands showing four fingers. No, not four o’clock. What’s the ISL for half four? It’s a simple enough system. They display the sign numbers from memory: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5...10. The maneuver is repeated over and over again. At the back of my head, I’m linking fingers with figures. The sunshine has change to an orange glow and it’s getting slightly dark outside. The students get personal with each other. They introduce themselves in ISL: “Hello.” “What is your name?” “My name is...” “Where are you from” “I’m from...” “How many brothers and sisters have you?” “I have...” The interaction goes on. There is a one-to-one between teacher and student. The rest are paired together going through the introductions and using the sign alphabet “a, b, c, d, e, f” from the chart displaying ISL and English alphabets. Performance vary in the handling and decoding of finger spelling. Some mismatches here and there but overall good progress.*

*“Learn this at home” I say. “ISL alphabet learning should be done at home, not here.”*

*I fingerspell H-O-M-E and show them the ISL sign for "home."*

*"Home. You do this: a, b, c, d, e... Okay?"*

*A few students nod. Others turn to the next person beside them mouthing "What?" I wave my hand to get their attention. I point to my eyes, then, my chest.*

*"Watch me. Home. W-O-R-K. Work. H-O-M-E-W-O-R-K. Homework. At home you learn and here you sign a, b, c, d..."*

*They now have a head start having access to video recording in ISL. The videos contain personal stories shared in ISL by deaf people. The clip shows how fingerspelling work. By dint of practice, students learn by watching, rewinding and watching over and over again. Some of them know how to finger spell by heart. They reel off the alphabet, sometimes flicking their fingers hesitantly but soon randomly and spontaneously.*

\*

The story is an example of how learning the ISL alphabet and finger spelling words create the parameter for linguistic contact zones where aspects of ISL and English meet, struggle and grapple with each other. The students' negotiated linguistic encounters emerge in the exchange of personal information through ISL. They discover the presence of English in ISL in the form of fingerspelling and sign alphabet. The story highlights the salience of learning the alphabet and spelling words through their hands. The focus is on developing ability to "handle" and "decode" finger spelling by "learning to see" (Wilcox & Wilcox, 1997) with their "eyes" as opposed to "hearing" with their "ears." These contact zone situations reveal the extent of the students' struggle with learning which is generally consistent with what McKee and McKee (1992, p. 131) describe as "difficulties that hearing learners face in acquiring and using a language in a visual-gestural modality, as opposed to the familiar aural/oral modality." The students eventually learned to overcome linguistic barriers through peer support and accessing the video clips at home.

\*

*November 6, 2015. "Look at the photo" I direct the student's attention to the screen by pointing with my finger. "Tell me...what...you see? ISL, okay?" The students are grouped together, three groups. Everyone studies the photo and consult with each other in the group. Some use ISL but others converse in English. They have to respond in ISL, not in English. In the photo is a man and woman walking in the park with their three children, two of them twins. The photo is comparatively recent; the oldest child is about 6 years old, the twins 4 years. Their parents are holding their hands, walking a few feet from the pond where a number of ducks are floating. The children's gaze is on the ducks, the youngest has her arms stretched out, finger pointing in the direction of the pond. The sun is shining. There are several tall trees in the background. A red car is parked close to the pavement. I point to the group on my right.*

*"I'll start with you...what you see?"*

*One of the student raises her hand. She hesitates at first, trying to figure out the sign, then, turns to the next student.*

*"What? W-A-L-K-I-N-G. Walking?"*

*"Yes. Who?" I ask.*

*The rest of the students imitate, repeating the sign for WALKING.*

*“Good” I say. “Who is...?”*

*“Woman. Man. Children....”*

*“Are they a couple?”*

*“Married.”*

*“Three children...Boy. Girl?”*

*“Yes, that’s good” I say. “Do it like this...” I show them how to place the finger on the chin. “Like this, okay?”*

*“Okay.”*

*Another student spreads her hands. “Married?”*

*“That’s right. What’s in the background there?”*

*I point to the screen. This is the sixth picture shown in class. We have been revising lessons using picture stories and card games. The students are beginning to look more like ISL users. They’ve been displaying short ISL sentences, taking it all cheerfully, connecting signs with photos. Our class sessions now revolve around role play, group work and picture stories. Telling stories in ISL has helped keep the language alive in the classroom for as long as possible.*

*One student frowns at another student. She looks at me, her forehead creased, eyebrows furrowed. She shakes her head.*

*“I don’t know. Sorry.”*

*“That’s okay. The sign for yellow? Do it like this...”*

*They now use ISL signs for colors, describe people in the picture by the color of the clothes they wear: red, blue, black, pink, yellow, white, green. They need ISL verbs to describe what people are doing. The students can tell the age of the children having learned the ISL for numbers: 1,2,3,4,5,6...10.*

*“Age 7? 4?”*

*“Years” I sign. “like this...”*

*“Okay”*

*I say. “Now try this: Man and woman stand with children.”*

*They all sign in unison. “Man,” “Woman,” “stand,” “children.” “Good.” Picture stories, they are great for learning. Activities like these help them express themselves in ISL. They’ve been describing the way people stand in a queue waiting for a bus. ISL verb signs for “watching,” “waiting” “looking,” “walking,” “standing” and “sitting.” People are doing a lot of things in the photo. The students are doing signs, hand shapes, body orientation, movement. Enough ISL sign adjectives for describing people, places and things. A picture of a winter scene comes up. There is ...no, it’s not raining. Remember “driving in the rain”? Yes? This is...snow? Yes, snow. That’s right, a car is parked, covered in snow. Anything else?*

\*

The rhetoric of linguistic contact zones in my interaction with students is particularly interesting. My strategy was to hand over to the students the initiative to use picture content to express themselves in ISL. This was initially established, using various on-screen images, as a result of students’ answers to a series of questions asked in ISL. The details were used to test their knowledge of ISL and ability to tell a story in ISL. I had perceived this “contact zone situation” would make teaching and learning more effective. My intention was to “keep the language alive” in the classroom and possibly help avoid using English while class was in session. This approach was in line with CEFR guidelines on teaching and learning languages



(Sadlier et al., 2012). In the ebb and flow of the lessons, students seemed “more like ISL users,” becoming increasingly comfortable with using their hands. At times, though, a number of them were inclined to “converse in English” when seeking peer support. This was quite understandable given the students were doing beginner’s level ISL. I had contemplated the idea of imposing a strict “no English” or “no voice” rule and had planned to tag a “Welcome to ISL Land” poster on the door outside. However, this was something that did not sit comfortably with me. Perhaps the anxiety was triggered by childhood experience of sign language suppression since, to paraphrase Brookfield (2015), a teacher’s self-directedness is often “culturally learned.” It was my belief that students should never be denied the right to use their own language. On the basis of my beliefs about teacher, I gave them the space to speak English, take ownership of their learning and become independent learners.

## Reflections

By connecting the personal to the cultural through autoethnography, I allowed myself become susceptible to the shifting patterns of contact zone scenarios. With that level of awareness comes an unconscious response to the complex interplay of deaf and hearing cultures. In trying to associate the two and link them together, I have encouraged students to move out of what Platt (1991) calls “safe houses” into “DEAF spaces” (Gulliver, 2009) where they “meet” a deaf teacher and learn “grapple” in ISL communication. A consequence of contact zones is that both teacher and students eventually come to a mutual understanding of each other’s overlapping contexts of audiological and linguistic relations. This was achieved on a number of fronts.

Firstly, notions of audiological identities were first prompted by the question, “When did you become hearing?” There is a sense that “hearing identity” is constituted by a process of *becoming* which implies some kind of change is happening. As Lawlor (2008) notes, identity is not static but rather fluid and interchanging. Initially, before coming to class, hearing students experience a sense of connection with each other not through audiological identification but through explicit group identification based on ethnicity, age, culture, gender, and nationality. The fact that they are hearing was never an issue until they were confronted by a deaf identity. At this point of contact, they were only beginning to gather insight into a new sense of belonging. This was, for me, a critical challenge. It was imperative to raise awareness of who they are in relation to teacher identity. Being *deaf* or *hearing* means people operate from different audiological stand points which often shape perceptions about the status of languages. When deaf and hearing identities make their acquaintance, they create a unique set of experiences for both teacher and student.

Secondly, my concern was to highlight relations between oral-auditory (English) and visual (ISL) language affiliations. I was particularly interested in understanding how the classroom produced a contact zone characterized by resistance and adaptation. The effort to create appropriate conditions for ISL served to keep ISL “alive” and English at minimum. However, my attempt was often thwarted when students involuntarily communicated in English. This was not an “act of rebellion” on their part. Far from it. It was rather a coping strategy used to deal with a limited ISL vocabulary. Pratt’s (1991) contact zone theory suggest that risks must be taken in order to come to a better understanding of the learning experience. For that to happen, students must momentarily leave behind “the familiar” and take a chance at discovering “the unfamiliar.” I learned to adapt by giving them space to create their own learning environment. The challenge to adapt to their ways of learning was a challenge to resist the temptation to impose my own beliefs about teaching.

Thirdly, when I tried to coax them out of their safe houses, I noticed a willingness in the students to participate in the learning. They rarely lacked for effort to understand how two

worlds collide in a contact zone. Sign language teachers could use this idea to open up a discussion of how deaf and hearing identities intersect and get translated in the interaction. Finally, I assert that teachers consider contact zone precepts for examining their roles in relation to students because sign language teaching is rooted in these theories.

## Epilogue

The process of writing this autoethnography involves writing a layered narrative full of autobiographic stories, observations, reflections, theory and analysis (Ellis, 2004). The scope and scale of this work is in the subjective experience of the author. Given current tendencies to focus on sign language teaching practice, pedagogy, curriculum, programs and the linguistic components of sign language, the article is a departure from previous research. It extends the literature by showing the kind of narrative that are possible for sign language teachers to narrate. Autoethnography makes cultural and personal experience accessible. The benefit of engaging in autoethnographic methods is in the opportunity for sign language teachers to make experience accessible and to be able to reflect on their emotions in a meaningful way, to come to an understanding of self and understanding of others in social and cultural contexts (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). Sign language teachers can benefit by relating their experience with mine and consider how they might do research on their teaching experience. Readers may experience how it feels to teach sign language and get a sense of what it was like inside the classroom. Autoethnography makes it possible for others to be “here” in the text and be “there” in the classroom (Spry, 2001). My writing allows one to sense a chaotic experience arising from contact zone situations. Animated words (“curl,” “turn” “flex,” “tap,” “squint,” “crease”) have been used to capture the rhythm of hand shapes, body movement and facial expression. Embodied words that give a muted feel allow readers sense the experience of being deaf. The reader goes through the same experience as the author and gets the essence of the teacher experience subjectively told.

## Postscript

Included in a feedback questionnaire are students’ retrospective comments on their learning experience. No data identifying them with real names or IDs were included in this evaluation. Their comments are presented here in gender neutral language. To begin with, one student stated that we “used videos and media to support our learning” and this “made learning ISL enjoyable.” Another commented that their teacher “encouraged [the student] to perform better” with “repeated signs for the benefit of the class.” The teacher was described as “very enthusiastic” and “approachable” because the student “felt very comfortable [about] asking questions.” A criticism about course structure was that “more emphasis should be on learning and using ISL.” One student felt email communication “was of great benefit to students who wouldn’t feel comfortable speaking out in front of class.” Another noted “how difficult it is for hearing people with very little ISL to communicate with a deaf person without an interpreter.” Overall, most students shared the view that “learning ISL will benefit [us] when [we] become teachers” and “more opportunities are needed to learn ISL.”

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