

## VOICE OF THE VOICELESS

*by:*

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"Words are powerful," they say. Either they create or destroy. They are either blades or bandages. They could save or stab, heal or harm. That is how potent words can be. But what if you can't speak or hear a single word? Is it still possible to be silent yet be heard? To not hear but to understand? To be voiceless but communicate? With sign language, those are definitely possible! As sign language refers to any "means of communication using body movements when spoken communication is not possible nor desirable" (Britannica, 2020), it has long been used by the deaf community to converse with other people – hearing or not. As a result, sign languages have become an invaluable tool for those with hearing impairment who use them (Harrison, 2019). While sign languages such as ASL\*, BSL\*\*, and FSL\*\*\* are especially beneficial to the deaf or hard-of-hearing, they can also be beneficial to those who can hear. To us, hearing people, sign language will allow us to immerse ourselves in the deaf community, allowing us to build relationships with diverse people, stimulate our brains in the same way that learning other spoken languages does, and provide us with exciting and great career opportunities. With such gains, there isn't any reason to keep us from learning it, is there?

Learning a sign language, say, ASL or FSL shall allow us to converse with a vast range of hearing, hard of hearing, and deaf individuals. As we know, communication is crucial in building relationships with others. Communication is needed to express our inner thoughts, desires, and emotions. It allows us to set our goals and meet them. Likewise, it also resolves disputes and misunderstandings. Without proper communication, it is impossible to make connections between and among people. And because the world is full of diverse individuals, there are circumstances in which verbal

communication is not always viable. Sign language becomes handy as it will give us the capability to converse even to those who barely hear and totally can't. Consequently, it will expand our circle by allowing us to reach out to the people of the deaf community. Moreover, it will make us learn about the deaf culture as we immerse ourselves in it, thereby driving us to appreciate the beauty of diversity even more.

Another good reason for learning a sign language is that it can stimulate our brain the way learning other languages besides our mother tongue does. Palmero (n.d.) recounts that a study by a lecturer at Edinburgh's School of Philosophy, Psychology and Language Sciences reveals that young adults who were adept in two languages had better concentration and attention than those who were monolingual. When they were retested as adults, the lecturer found out that the participants who later became bilingual performed better than expected, as seen in their general intelligence and reading proficiency. In addition, Palmero (n.d.) also claims that learning a language helps improve thinking skills and memory abilities. Generally, it improves the brain's executive functioning. Being a different language from a spoken one (e.g., ASL differs from spoken English), and sign language involves its own grammar and is, by itself, a "complete and natural language" ("American Sign Language", 2019). In short, learning sign language is similar to studying a second language – an activity that enhances cognitive functioning.

Being proficient at sign language may open doors of opportunity for hearing individuals as well. According to Berke (2020b), the range of careers open for those who know sign language has broadened. Furthermore, she enumerates the possible careers for those who are proficient at sign language (ASL, in her article). Those who are adept at it may enter the fields of education, health, government and law enforcement, and recreation. In education, one may be a SPED teacher, sign language instructor, interpreter in schools, or private tutor. In the field of health, medical professionals who know sign language can communicate better with patients. Social workers and psychologists who know how to sign are at an advantage, too. Proficiency in sign language may also land

someone a job in the fields of law enforcement, government, and even recreation, for it is a skill that turns out to be very handy.

Despite the advantages of learning sign language, some hearing individuals may still be hesitant to do it. For instance, hearing parents of a deaf child might still be in denial about their child's condition that they avoid learning sign language as it makes the "deafness real" (Berke, 2020a). Other people who do not personally know a person who is hard of hearing may lack the motivation and time to study sign language. As we know, learning a second language is a bit challenging. Since studying it is akin to studying a second (spoken) language, lots of practice, exposure, and dedication are needed to master it. As a result, some people may feel reluctant about spending time learning sign language. In addition, some courses that provide certifications may be costly for an average-earning individual. Nevertheless, the gains from being skilled at sign language still outweigh those challenges.

Sign language is the voice of the voiceless. It is a valuable tool that enables them to convey their thoughts and emotions to other people. Most of the time though, they are limited to communicating only to those few who can sign. Hence, hearing people should try to learn sign language, even just the basic words or phrases so that our community can be more inclusive. With this, those with disabilities like the deaf and hard-of-hearing could take part in the various endeavors of society. By learning sign language, we, hearing individuals, could give them the voice to be heard and understood. And while sign language is the voice of the deaf, our adeptness at it would also be beneficial to us. It would help us build relationships with diverse individuals, stimulate our brains akin to learning other spoken languages, and provide us with good career opportunities. So, there isn't a big reason not to learn sign language, is there?

\*ASL – American Sign Language

\*\*BSL – British Sign Language

\*\*\*FSL - Filipino Sign Language

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