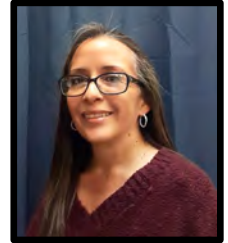


The Signed Language Situation Becomes More Interesting Than Ever

By Christina Diaz



In the United States, scholars and researchers frequently talk about American Sign Language or ASL as the only signed language in use. It is true that deaf Americans most likely know ASL as their sole signed language. Whenever bilingualism is addressed, it is typically about ASL and English. The problem with this picture is that ASL is a signed language, and English is not. The status of English as a spoken language is in itself a complication to the education of deaf students, for example. What I want to address here is Mexican Sign Language or LSM. The notion of a person knowing this signed language along with ASL would be a true example of bilingualism in the signed modality.

We need to ask ourselves this question: What does signing look like for many deaf people who reside in El Paso, Texas. The reason I bring up El Paso is simple. I live in that city myself. El Paso is widely known as a border city that sits across a river from Mexico. Over the years, there are deaf Mexicans who crossed the border from the south and chose El Paso as their new home. Consequently, LSM has found its way into the United States.



Source: avenzamaps.com

Being a professional interpreter, I have worked with many deaf people in and around El Paso. I could not help but observe the prevalence of LSM in that area of the United States. I appreciate the fact that a local sign language interpreter preparation program has provided some education to the future interpreters about the deaf individuals who might 'speak' in LSM. However, I would like to make a clarification. Too many people seem to like to think that LSM and ASL operate separately as two signed languages in all signing contexts. In reality, there is a more complex situation going on with LSM and ASL among deaf signers in El Paso. This would be similar to what is known for hearing speakers with Spanglish – a combination of English and Spanish spoken within the same sentences. I would like to call this signed language contact phenomenon as ASL/LSM for the purpose of this article.

ASL/LSM occurs naturally and fluently within the area of western Texas or where El Paso is located. Both deaf and hearing signers are affected by ASL/LSM. I also want to say that many signers who originally know only ASL have found themselves acquiring LSM through the community, workshops, religious groups, and cross-country partnerships. As far as El Paso is

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concerned, bilingualism in the signed language modality has become a reality in the United States.

Unfortunately, little if any education on LSM is provided via the classroom setting in the interpreter preparation programs that have been established in Texas and throughout the United States. Lessons that are available are few and far between, thus not allowing for steady growth of LSM learning opportunities within the collective body of those seeking to establish careers as future interpreters. Present interpreters focus honing their skills in ASL. Few are familiarizing themselves in LSM and its grammatical structure beyond identifying a few signs. The percentage of deaf signers wielding information entirely or in part in Mexican signs is high compared to the low number of interpreters who have a decent grasp of them.



**FAMILIA in LSM
(family)**



**ESCUELA in LSM
(school)**

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There is another related topic that I wish to discuss. The importance of LSM being offered as a foreign signed language for deaf students throughout the United States cannot be further emphasized. I reason that if many hearing students are taking ASL as their foreign language for study, deaf students must have the opportunity of learning a foreign signed language as well. I can promise you that studying LSM as a foreign language will be a powerful learning experience for many deaf students. These students would develop a much deeper understanding about signed languages in general and the Mexican deaf culture, for example.

As far as I know, LSM does not constitute a high priority for learning in schools or higher education settings. I look forward to a change to this situation in the near future. I personally believe that the bilingualism associated with LSM and ASL will continue to thrive in El Paso, Texas. I am proud to be part of this American city. I hope that the remarks that I made are of value to you and help in shedding a new light on the signed language situation in the United States.