

Major Points Included in the Introduction to the Principles of Fingerspelling Video

Are you ready to learn fingerspelling linguistics, how to use it, and why to use it? People who learn ASL tend to struggle with receptive fingerspelling, saying that it's hard and difficult to understand. This issue is common.

Research shows that this issue arises because people assume that fingerspelling is English-bound and limited to English words, following English spelling rules. In reality, fingerspelling in ASL is part of the signed language system. Does that mean English limits fingerspelling? No. You can use Roman, Latin, etc., to fingerspell. For instance, people who live in Puerto Rico (PR) and speak Spanish – those deaf people learn ASL but in their conversational dialogue, they fingerspell in Spanish. However, that's because fingerspelling is not ASL-bound but rather language-bound. In PR, these individuals learn ASL but also converse in Spanish, so they're able to use both features in one.

Fingerspelling represents Roman letters; PR people use ASL through language contact – they read and write Spanish in the deaf community and develop those fingerspelling skills for communication success. For people in the mainland, they use ASL to interact, and language contact is influenced by English.

With language contact, your language is evolving and malleable, influenced by different languages. Language and cultural use influence and change things.

Now, we are discussing specifically fingerspelling – is it really “fingerspelling”? It seems like it shouldn't be. Sometimes people who speak English, for instance, do they call it “mouthspelling”? No, there is no such word. They simply verbalize that word. For instance, spelling out the name “MARY” - they say M-A-R-Y – that is spelling. Now for ASL, when we spell the name “MARY” - people ask how to spell it, we slow down to M-A-R-Y, M-A-R-Y; it's the same process of voicing out how to spell MARY. In regular conversations, you introduce yourself in English by saying MARY, just as you would introduce yourself in ASL by signing MARY.

In ASL, fingerspelling is a ‘sign’ itself. This handshape is the sign for A. This handshape is the sign for B, this handshape is the sign for C. That should shift your perspective – it is simply a sign. It's okay – fingerspelling is not scary! Just think about it as a sign itself – however, we are not taught the correct way. We are often taught the “neutral” way to sign – S-E-A-N R-Y-A-N H-A-U-S-C-H-I-L-D-T. That's my name in a neutral tone. It looks like you are stamping letters on a typewriter, very unnatural. In reality, when you spell my name it should look like S-E-A-N R-Y-A-N H-A-U-S-C-H-I-L-D-T. Did you see the difference? S-E-A-N R-Y-A-N H-A-U-S-C-H-I-L-D-T. My wrist hurts! That feels so unnatural; my arm is tense. That gives you an indicator that it's not the correct way. When you use the correct way of fingerspelling, you are following the correct phonological process. Now, I will discuss and compare the two – English linguistic features and ASL linguistic features, how they do have parallels. I will expand on that in the next video.