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Which terms for levels of sign language should we use?

As I presented my workshops, I needed to refer to people who do not necessarily have strong skills in English and may also not be fluent in ASL. I chose to use the phrase "low socioeconomic status." However, one participant asked her friends about using the term "minimal language skills." Others disagreed and offered these suggestions (see below) but I have put comments after each term that explain that none of these terms is quite right to describe this group. What about using "Deaf people with a self-made signing system" or "Deaf individuals who communicate via a self-designed non-standard language"?

- Idiosyncratic Language
- Visual/Gestural Language user
- Functional Fluency
- Highly visually oriented
- High Visual Deaf/Needs
- Visual Vernacular Gestures

Years ago, people used to (rudely) call Deaf people who were weak in English skills "people with broken English." Of course, this eventually changed to something slightly less insulting: "Low Verbal Deaf." Then this became unacceptable, particularly since many Deaf people were fluent in American Sign Language, which has its own "verbal" aspects (vocabulary and grammar), even though these people might be less than fluent in English.

Then the next euphemism for such a Deaf person became "someone with Minimal Language Skills." Some people initialized this: MLS. Some used "Minimal Language Competency" These two terms mainly referred to Deaf individuals who were at low levels of fluency in both English and ASL, or who had developed almost no language skills. These individuals had often experienced very poor educational backgrounds. Many people thought, however, that someone described as MLS or MLC must have low intelligence. Thus, these terms also began to seem incorrect and insulting for those who had strong ASL skills, and even for those who had few skills in any language. After all, their environments and poor educational opportunities may have simply not given them opportunity to learn any language well. So they continued to use basic gestures (not a full sign language) and "home signs" (not recognized by the general population). In some cases, education had been provided, but only orally (speech and speechreading or auditory verbal [AV] programs), and the learners had not thrived in these environments. No test was available to determine if their language competence in a signed language or in a vocal

language was low because of lack of educational opportunities, or because of developmental delays in mental capacity.

Some people used to call those with limited English "Grass-roots Deaf" but this is such a loose term. It could mean where these people stand educationally, politically, or culturally.

No one has yet developed an accurate, descriptive, respectful term for those with minimal language skills. However, RID recognizes that interpreting for this population is necessary, and often a Certified Deaf Interpreter will act as an intermediary between a regular ASL interpreter and English users.

We suggested "low socioeconomic status" to take the labels off the persons and place it, instead, in their learning environment. Hearing children with low socioeconomic status may also "talk differently" from well-educated people. This sometimes results in people thinking that these individuals are "slow" or "developmentally delayed" when it may be that they have simply had little opportunity to obtain higher-level learning, thus leaving these individuals with a very small repertoire of language structure and vocabulary.

We understand that you want to characterize this group of people in order to teach how to best communicate with them. This is a very delicate issue. We do not want to "look down our noses" at those people without strong language skills of any kind, ASL or English.

1. **Idiosyncratic Language** - Language that is part of a linguistically sophisticated system but is a little bit "different" - to me, this implies that they may have just "home signs" and a few bits of ASL. But the word, "idiosyncratic" really implies that the person's signing is so individualized that no one can directly understand it.
2. All sign languages may be described as "**visual-gestural**." The problem with using this to describe those who have almost no language at all is that the words are not clear.
3. **Functional Fluency** - Usually, a person who is not fluent in any language, including a sign language, is NOT functioning independently in society. Therefore, their language skills cannot be described as "functionally fluent." In fact, the whole problem is that they are not fluent in any language, nor in daily "functions" (life activities). The term has an opposite: Low Functioning. This sounds inappropriate, too.
4. **Highly visually oriented**: This technically means that the person focuses more on visual things than on non-visual things. It has nothing to do with describing language levels.
5. **High Visual/Deaf Needs**: In the current society in the U.S., it is considered unprofessional and impolite to label people according to what someone else perceives as their "Needs." Speaking this way about someone makes the speaker/person who labels feel superior to the inferior/person who is described. Thus, we now have terms like assessing to find out where the Deaf student is in regard to "vertical alignment with grade-level standards" but this would only apply to children and teens K-12.
6. **Visual Vernacular Gestures**: "Vernacular" simply means the everyday language, the common language, the language that is generally used in an area, the native language, or a language that is used by a group of people but is not considered "formal" or "official" - This describes some kind of language that is common-to (similar to) others' language. Yet the type of signing level we are trying to describe is different from the norm. It is often simply gestures and not signing at all. The gestures may be easily understood or not easily understood by others, but they are not part of an actual group's language.

In English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), we use the term: English Language Learners (ELL). This usually begins with either “literacy” (a level so low that the hearing person was never educated in reading and writing in his/her own country’s language), or “Low Beginning” but this is in regard ONLY to comparing their skill levels IN ENGLISH. This does not describe their language levels all together. The person may be near zero in English and in writing their own language, but still quite fluent in speaking and listening to their native language.

Here is a sample of an ESOL ranking for children’s language levels when they enter school:

<http://ell.dpi.wi.gov/files/ell/pdf/elp-levels.pdf>

Here is a way that a certain instructional program labels 7 levels:

<http://sdce.edu/classes/esl/esl-level-descriptions.php>

You really have no easy choices in describing the group of Deaf people who are not fluent in any sign language and not fluent in English. As ASL is not a written language, labels for "literacy" levels do not help us describe those who are fluent in neither ASL nor English.

Generally, people in a low socioeconomic level are less well-educated than others. Language levels are usually aligned with income and educational levels.

You could just say, "Deaf individuals lacking fluency in sign and in English" or something like, People within a category called, “Low Language Fluency.” This would mean that the person had no fluency in any language. But this may not describe someone who is fluent in ASL but who knows no English at all.

You could talk about it in terms of how much English someone knows and how much ASL someone knows:

- Limited ASL Level
- Limited English Level
- Limited ASL and English Levels
- Limited Language Levels
- Limited Language Proficiency

Here are the levels as described by the U.S. government:

http://careers.state.gov/gateway/lang_prof_def.html

0 = No Practical Proficiency

1 = Elementary Proficiency

2 = Limited Working Proficiency (and so on – check the link for a chart)

Best of luck in trying to describe this group of people without being condescending!