



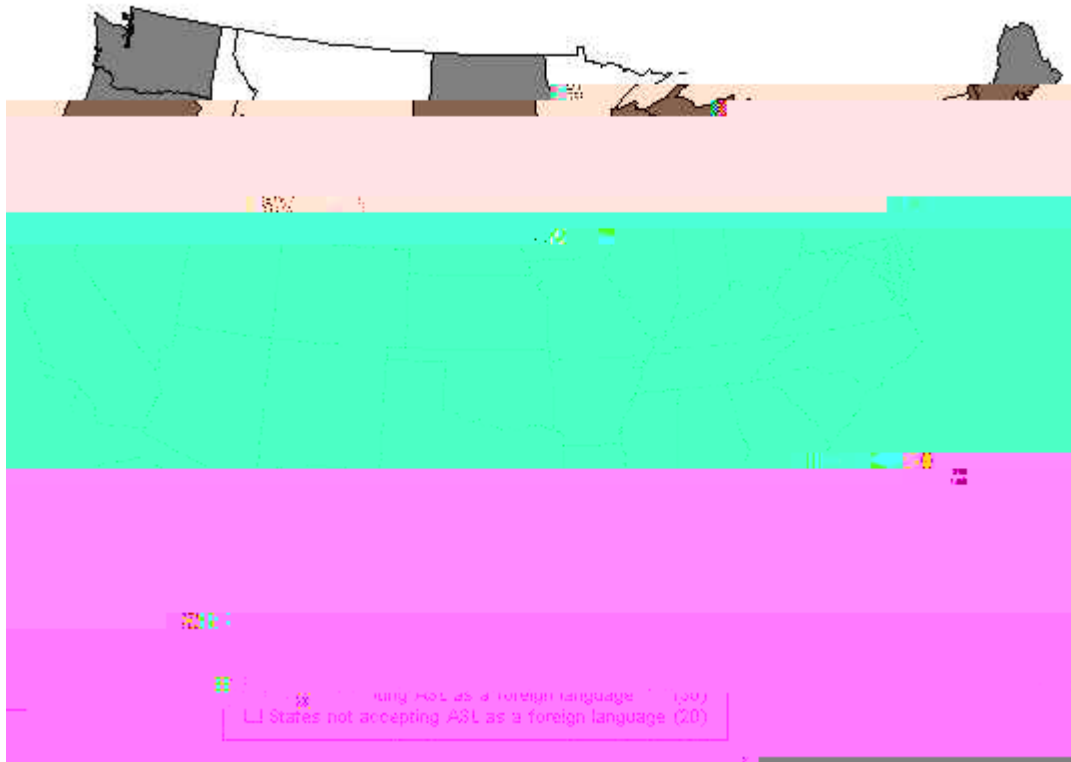
There has been a marked swell of support in recent years for the instruction of American Sign Language as a foreign language. Many colleges and universities, both private and public, are beginning to recognize the study of ASL and deaf culture as legitimate academic pursuits and are starting to accept ASL in fulfillment of their foreign language entrance and exit requirements. As noted above, some states have also taken the step of recognizing ASL as a foreign language in their public schools (Figure 1). Such action, however, does raise some legitimate questions.

Most notably, some in academia question whether it is appropriate to consider ASL a foreign language or a second language due largely to the fact that ASL is indigenous to the United States and most people who communicate through ASL read and write in English. As Professor Sherman Wilcox of the University of New Mexico notes, however, although ASL is spoken exclusively in the U.S. and Canada, other languages, such as Navajo, are spoken exclusively in the U.S. and are recognized as a valid second language for study (Wilcox, n.d.). "The controversy comes from people who don't understand the nature of sign language," says Susan Gass, co-director of the Center for Language Education and Research at Michigan State University. "Probably, you won't find any controversy among linguists" (Conover, 1997).

Proponents of ASL as a foreign language such as Wilcox additionally point to the rich cultural life of deaf people in response to the criticism that ASL does not have a full and distinct culture associated with it. "Deaf culture is now recognized and studied by anthropologists, ethnographers, folklorists, and others interested in culture and cross cultural communication" (Wilcox, n.d.).

Wilcox notes further, "because of its unique modality—visual/gestural rather than aural/oral—many people wrongly assume that ASL is fundamentally different than spoken languages." There is a great deal of research dealing with ASL which demonstrates that its grammar is radically different from English; it contains structures and processes which English lacks (Wilcox, n.d.). In post-secondary education, however, some foreign-language departments do sometimes balk at the designation of ASL as a "foreign" language, especially those that emphasize literature. For example, in 1997 at Clemson University, the foreign-language department was open to the proposal that ASL be considered a foreign language, but they asked that proponents prove that the deaf community had its own unique culture (Conover, 1997).

In recent years sign language has additionally become recognized as a legitimate and distinct language on an international scale. In 1988, the Parliament of the European Community recognized the indigenous signed languages of the twelve member states as legitimate languages, making note of the fact that 500,000 citizens of member states use their national signed languages as their first language (Wilcox, n.d.).



Conover, Kristen. December 18, 1997. "In Gesture Toward Change, Schools Sign On To 'Signing'". E,

Compiled by Sara Davies, Sarah O'Brien, and Matthew Reed on March 26, 2001