

As a kindergartner who never wanted to sleep during naptime, I tried to find a way to occupy myself during those thirty minutes every school day. I ended up fixating on a poster that displayed the alphabet in American Sign Language. For the rest of the year, I made it my mission to learn to sign all of the letters, silently practicing each handshape as the rest of my classmates napped. I did not know anyone from the Deaf community, but my intrinsic fascination with other languages stuck with me. Growing up speaking Spanish and English, I always thought languages were interesting but there was something about signed languages, produced in a completely different modality than any language I knew, that stuck with me from the age of five onward, guiding my interests both in how we use and think about language. Years later, my motivation to learn ASL resurfaced in college when I had a Deaf linguistics professor who signed all of his lectures, prompting me to register to take ASL-1 the following fall.

Many of the classes I took during my time as an undergrad helped me explore my interests in language, particularly ASL. Being able to take ASL for two years helped me to greatly improve my proficiency as a signer as well as be able to start asking questions about sign languages from a psychological point of view.

I was also able to involve myself in psychological research at the [lab name], where I am currently working part-time as a research assistant. Homesign is big at [undergrad university], so I had heard it mentioned briefly several times, but it was not until I took a class with [professor] that I really got to learn about homesign in depth. I was hooked. I found it fascinating, being able to look at this foundation of language that was more complex than gesture but not quite a full-fledged language. I took up an opportunity to work with [researcher] on noun-verb distinction with Guatemalan homesigners. I also helped out coding participant videos of NSL and ASL signers, so I was exposed to sign language research as well as homesign. Along with getting familiar with homesign and sign language research, by involving myself with gesture coding, I have learned the process of writing and revising coding manuals and using data to reformulate hypotheses and coding.

A year before I started working in the [lab], I began working as a research assistant at [research center] in the education, training and learning department. Although a majority of this research was not strictly psychological and generally more education-focused, the work I did on early literacy interventions for English- and Spanish-speaking children made me more aware of the importance of early exposure to language and its effect on future literacy in children. Through working at both the [lab] and [research center], I was able to draw connections from things I learned at [research center] regarding general education and language to what I was researching in the [lab] regarding homesign as well as what I was studying in school regarding ASL.

In addition to working in the [lab], I am currently a student success coach with City Year, which involves being a middle school math tutor in an under-served school in [city]. Through this work I have gotten valuable experience with intense collaboration as well as learning how to teach. The school I am currently working in has a high population of Spanish-speakers so I am able to use my Spanish in the classroom. Additionally this has made me think about learning and teaching in a second language, particularly with regard to math.

While there is an abundance of research on language development and acquisition, sign languages are still largely in the periphery; homesign is even more niche. In the United States,

many people are unfamiliar with ASL and believe various misconceptions about it and its status as a full-fledged language. I distinctly remember my professor debunking myths such as all sign languages being the same on the first day of introduction to linguistics. Furthermore, much of what would seem like common sense to people familiar with ASL and/or the Deaf community are not widely acknowledged or realized. For example, early exposure to any language (i.e. ASL) influences regular number sense and achievement. As I am currently working as a math tutor, we are taught to first represent concepts pictorially and later move into symbolic representation. Since some of ASL is iconic—such as the counting numbers 1 through 5—I wonder if can this be leveraged for faster or easier mathematical understanding. Ideally, I would like to be able to pursue research in both sign language as well as homesign, as there is still so much that is still not yet completely understood.

The developmental psychology program at the [*grad school*] is a very good fit for me to pursue my graduate studies, and I would absolutely be a strong asset to this program. Because my interest in sign languages and homesign is somewhat niche, the fact that the [*grad school*] has a lab that focuses primarily on those areas makes it one of the few programs that aligns with my research interests so directly. I appreciate that [*prospective advisor*] expects all graduate students to be proficient in ASL, which fosters a more Deaf-friendly environment and opens more lines of communication between researchers regardless of whether they are hearing or Deaf. Since I spent two years becoming proficient in ASL, I would be very excited to be able to use this language and be a part of this effort to make this research environment more inclusive. Considering my background, not only in learning ASL, but my several years of experience coding gesture and signs as well as my work ethic and self-motivation, I would be well-equipped to further research and future projects in this lab.

My professional goals are to get a PhD in psychology and pursue a career as a psychological researcher focusing on language with an emphasis on sign languages. I would like to be able to contribute to research like this with the intention to help dispel harmful myths about other languages and those who use them, give better insight into other languages and promote linguistic diversity. Perhaps such research will make it more commonplace for other languages (including sign languages) to be taught in school, thus normalizing hearing people learning ASL and fostering communication. Perhaps in the future, linguistic diversity will be encouraged so that people are learning all sorts of spoken and signed languages, and it will not be that unique for a little hearing kid trying to teach herself ASL.