

FROM THE WORLD'S TROUBLE SPOTS  
THEY ARRIVE IN OUR CLASSROOMS:

# Working with Deaf Refugees and Immigrants

*By Pamela Wright Moers*

Watching my sixth graders make their cards—drawing, cutting, and gluing flowers on folded cardstock—I realized that I had a dilemma. The words I'd inscribed on the board, "Happy Mother's Day," would mean little to the women who were my students' mothers. It dawned on me that my students were writing in a language that their mothers probably did not speak or read. This did not feel right.

Fortunately, a receptionist in the next room knew Spanish, and I asked her to come to my classroom. Within minutes she entered and wrote "¡Feliz Día de las Madres!" on my board. My students' eyes widened, a few of them smiled broadly, and they copied the phrase onto their cards.

Over the next few days, I was peppered with questions: "What is Spanish for *brother*? For *sister*? For *family*?" My students—at the Arizona School for the Deaf in Tucson—could recognize the difference between English and Spanish, but they did not know the discrete words of their own family's language. A new list was called for, and I posted an additional "word wall" in our classroom with English words and their Spanish translations.

This happened back in 2004. Since then, I've worked with deaf and hard of hearing refugees and immigrants from Cambodia, Ethiopia, Kenya, Myanmar and the Karen State, and Nepal. Their families moved here with their own history, heritage, culture, and language, and ever since I saw my students' faces brighten as they saw words that their families would recognize, I've tried to put myself in their place and see the world through their eyes as well as my own.

*Photos courtesy of Pamela Wright Moers*

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The more I taught, the more I learned just how acutely different our worlds can be. During a Halloween activity, Seana, 17, a refugee from Cambodia, asked me to explain cartoon images of a smiling witch and a zombie. Imagine her face when I told her that witches are not real—they are scary creatures who fly around in the air on brooms. Zombies are not real either, and they are worse—dead bodies that rise up to haunt those who are still living. I somehow tried to justify the connection between my description, the cartoon, and our zeal for celebrating Halloween. This felt foolish, but I realized that I could not successfully teach international students if I clung to my own worldview. Teaching started with understanding where my students came from.

My refugee students fall on a wide spectrum. Some have no discernible language; some are fluent in the spoken, written, and signed languages of their own countries. Some have lived in a refugee camp with no education; a few have grown up in thriving deaf-centered programs. Some have seen their family members killed in war; a few fled in helicopters or lived in caves. Some got on a plane to the United States with no idea where they were headed. Many have loved ones back home that they might never see again. Some have had their own names changed for protection. Some have strong social connections to their community regardless of language access; others are completely isolated. Some have expectations for behavior based on gender that are vastly different from those they

**Above:** Deaf refugees in Denver enjoy an evening of education and interaction during an association of deaf internationals meeting. Countries represented in this group: Somalia, Ethiopia, Myanmar and the Karen State, Cambodia, Thailand, Iran, and the United States.

encounter here.

Many of my students have a very different view of time and may not understand how to make appointments. Some are offended by things that wouldn't cross our minds. Students from the Middle East, for example, may be offended when shown the soles of our shoes. Some have food restrictions and are forbidden to touch that pepperoni pizza everyone else is scrambling to get on their plates. Susan Lane-



**Left:** Taw describes how he hunted for food in Myanmar and was able to sell that batch of food for a good profit.

how inaccurate this evaluation had been. As he learned to trust his teachers and interpreters, he demonstrated a fluent use of his own sign language. He discussed the solar system, how to hunt for food and defuse land mines, and he completed algebraic equations. This was in no way a cognitive improvement; it was simply the result of Taw being able to show his capabilities because of his increased security and trust. His educational team completed a new evaluation with very different results.

Further, notes Lane-Outlaw, evaluations sometimes have a cultural bias. Dogs, for example, beloved by so many in the United States, are considered dangerous or

Outlaw, executive director of the Metro Deaf School in St. Paul, Minnesota, where 30 percent of the students are refugees, noted that some students might hoard food. Others will not know their own names or the names of family members (personal conversation, 2017).

The students bring a set of needs completely different from those of their U.S. counterparts. Their learning depends on responses to the following questions:

- Where did they come from?
- What have they experienced?
- What did they leave behind?
- How did they get here?
- What happened during their move?

For students who are deaf or hard of hearing, an even more important question may be: “Do they have a language?”

All of these factors affect the student’s transition and should shape how the educational team addresses the student’s needs. Lane-Outlaw noted that schools

should not rush to evaluate students, as results may change as students become more comfortable in their new environment. This happened to Taw, one of my students who is part of the Karen ethnic minority that relocated to escape murder, rape, and forced labor. When he lived in Myanmar, Taw first attended a program for “silent people,” which means “deaf people” in Karen culture, and learned both sign language and speech. Unfortunately, this did not continue. The people of his village were moved to a refugee camp where Taw became an easy target for the overseers’ impatience. For self-preservation, Taw learned to remain in the background, his affect flat and minimally responsive. He wanted to be left alone.

When Taw first arrived at his new school in the United States, he was evaluated by the school psychologists. They concluded he had an IQ of 63 and no functional language. A few months later, Taw, now adjusted to his new home and knowing he was safe, showed

**Language instruction must extend from the word level all the way to linguistic and cultural expectations; only the full breadth of language instruction will help them get and keep jobs.**



dirty in some parts of the world. Escalators and cotton candy, so familiar to American children, may be new for refugees. Nevertheless, schools may be instrumental in bringing families into the American experience, and this allows them to support their children's education. Lane-Outlaw noted that hiring spoken language interpreters did not bring parents to Parent Teacher Nights at the Metro Deaf School, but when the focus of the meetings changed to that of parents' culture of origin—when parents were invited to Latinx, Hmong, or African Nights and shared food—attendance reached 70 percent.

Working with language instruction in American Sign Language and English, I am often reminded that young people, including the refugees, will not understand the need for English language competency until the day they cross the threshold into adulthood and

need to support themselves. Doors will open or close for them depending on their range of ability.

Deaf and hard of hearing refugees and immigrants don't have the same starting line as their native-born peers. Their time is far more limited, with sometimes just a year or two of school-age eligibility, and they have much to accomplish. School isn't just about education—it may be the only place where they have the communication they need to help them make sense of their new world. It may be the only access they have to vital information needed to navigate the changes in their lives.

Language instruction must extend from the word level all the way to linguistic and cultural expectations; only the full breadth of language instruction will help them get and keep jobs. Communication must become a

collaborative process, with explicit tracking of feedback and comprehension. Understanding can't be assumed.

Conversations require intensive focus, but the rewards can be enormous.

Four years after learning about Halloween, Seana graduated from the Minnesota State Academy for the Deaf. During the graduation ceremony, she crossed a room with a "love letter" in her hand as a part of a graduation activity led by Kathleen and Chris Cornils, the parents of Eric Plunkett, a former Gallaudet student. The Cornils want families to have one moment where they stop, connect, and share cherished thoughts. During this activity, students and their families exchange letters of love and gratitude. As valedictorian, Seana placed her love letter in her parents' hands. It was written in the flowing script of Khmer.



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## **NEW** Activity Guide for Early Intervention Professionals

supports ***Setting Language in Motion***

*Setting Language in Motion*, a free, web-based resource, was launched last year with seven modules to share information critical to promoting early language acquisition for young children who are deaf or hard of hearing.

The **Activity Guide for Professionals: *Setting Language in Motion***, developed for early intervention professionals, has been added to accompany this resource to share ideas, strategies, and



resources to expand on each of these topics. This online guide includes over 40 activities, organized to enhance each module, based on the contributions of experienced early interventionists on the front lines.

Look for the activity guide on the Clerc Center's web page for *Setting Language in Motion* at [clerccenter.gallaudet.edu](http://clerccenter.gallaudet.edu).

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# Dispelling Myths Related to Deaf and Hard of Hearing Students

## WHO ARE NEW TO THE UNITED STATES

By Pamela Wright Moers

### MYTH #1:

**A deaf or hard of hearing refugee or immigrant can easily benefit from mainstream English as a Second Language (ESL) classes or programs.**



ESL teachers are excellent educators who recognize the importance of teaching English while respecting a child's home language and culture, but the typical ESL program assumes that the student already has a foundational spoken language. This may not be true for deaf or hard of hearing children. The ESL curriculum often develops language acquisition through first receptive and expressive skills, which means, in most instances, listening and speaking and then reading and writing (Cummins & McNeely, 1987; Cummins, 2000). For hearing students, new sounds are often difficult to speak, process, and even hear—and for deaf and hard of hearing students speaking, processing, and hearing may be even more challenging or impossible.

When Seana, a student from Cambodia, tried to take ESL at a nearby public high school, the classes focused primarily on hearing and speaking while reading simultaneously, requiring Seana, a visually dominant student, to watch the interpreter or teacher, seek out unfamiliar words on a page—sometimes in an unfamiliar alphabet—while also watching an unfamiliar sign language, and make sense of the input. She became deeply discouraged.

Instead of ESL classes, direct language instruction by a language instructor familiar with multilingual needs would benefit most deaf or hard of hearing immigrant students. This can happen with the use of a deaf language model or one-on-one language instruction with the student in the classroom. A high school in the Denver area of Colorado provides its deaf international students with deaf language models working alongside the regular classroom interpreter. This is written into the student's Individualized Education Program, making fluent language access a legal requirement.

### MYTH #2:

**An interpreter, either oral or sign language, is sufficient to provide the student with access to the curriculum.**

It may seem obvious that using ASL can't magically produce understanding for someone who only knows the sign language of another country. Unfortunately, people use ASL with immigrants and assume that comprehension occurs. Some deaf

interpreters are fluent in International Sign Language, but few international students understand International Sign Language. If a refugee already knows some sign language, he or she will have a head start in learning ASL but still need a starting point. The service provider and the student need to find common ground linguistically before progress can occur.

While a deaf mentor worked with Taw, she learned his sign language before attempting to teach him ASL or English. One day, Taw told a story about catching a softball-sized hopping animal for dinner after rainstorms. After struggling to put those concepts together to identify which animal Taw was talking about, the mentor searched online for images of "hopping animal." Taw pointed to an image of a frog and laughed. The mentor realized her cultural understanding of frogs did not include the size, rainstorms, or dinner, but images online helped them establish understanding and continue their conversation. Using images on the Internet can prompt language production and give teachers insight as to the strength of the student's first language base.

If the student is hard of hearing and can speak and partially hear language, it doesn't mean that he or she can hear enough to use a spoken language interpreter. If the spoken language interpreter has a different accent, the student may not understand the interpreter at all. Mariposa moved to Arizona from Equatorial Guinea, where she interacted easily with her family and peers as an oral-aural student. Spanish is the language of her country, and during her transition she was given a Spanish interpreter. However, the



pronunciation of Spanish varies, and she could not understand the interpreter. Furthermore, almost all the other Spanish speakers around her were of Mexican descent, and she could not understand them either.

Learning the phonemic differences unique to a language is difficult enough for hearing people. Expecting hard of hearing students to accomplish the same with less aural access and no additional support is setting them up for failure. For Mariposa, her transition became an isolating struggle. Using a Spanish language dictionary as a reference, Spanish speech therapy, and pull-out sessions helped. She was able to use support to build on her pre-existing knowledge base.

## MYTH #3:

A refugee or immigrant who uses sign language will immediately prefer deaf programs or center-based schools.

Haweeyo is a Somali girl with a perky personality and infectious smile. Fluent in Ethiopian Sign Language from the camp in which she grew up, she uses an interpreter in mainstream classes. Presented with the option to attend a deaf residential school, she declined. The school did not offer Halal food and there were no other Muslim students. In the mainstream, Haweeyo doesn't have many deaf friends, but she has other Muslim girls who cherish her. She interacts through gestures with these girls, then connects with other deaf Somalis worldwide, signing in ASL and Ethiopian Sign Language, through her phone several times a day. Just because a student prefers to use sign language does not mean he or she would prefer to be away from his or her culture. A student's religious and cultural community should receive the same respect as his or her communicative needs; and the student should have the opportunity to make an informed choice concerning his or her placement and program.



## MYTH #4:

Art and gym classes require no accommodations. Hands-on learning encourages student involvement and precludes the need for assistance.

It's easy to assume that art and gym classes, with more hands-on activities, would be the perfect learning opportunity for deaf and hard of hearing students who are immigrants or refugees. This isn't always true. In Taw's mainstreamed photography class, the teacher spoke quickly in a stream of precise and sometimes technical English: "Go to file ... make a new ... check the inches ... make sure its 8x10 ... 300 dpi ...". For Taw, it was impossible to watch his interpreter and locate the English words on his screen, much less follow the sequence quickly. Pointing to the icons and words on the screen did not work either; he couldn't retain the steps. After he experienced several days of a growing hate for the class, his deaf mentor came up with an idea. With two computers set up side by side and the same programs open, the deaf mentor demonstrated the steps on her screen and then explained the purpose for each step while Taw followed on his own computer using his own mouse. After a couple of demonstrations, Taw was able to finish his photography projects independently and he easily memorized the steps.

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