

All Signs Point to Learning



Betsy Techman (left), Spanish teacher at Twin Valley, and Debra Stoltzfus, BCIU educational interpreter, teach a class using the Total Physical Response Storytelling teaching method and sign language.

A group of students sit in a high school foreign language class. The teacher leads the class through the process of conjugating a verb as the students listen intently to the teacher's instruction. Learning a foreign language is rarely an easy task, and each student learns at his or her own pace. In this class, however, learning Spanish has become a unique experience for one particular student and her classmates.

Meet Ileia Lund, a sophomore in a Spanish II class at Twin Valley High School. Ileia has significant hearing loss. For such a student, receiving instruction in a class of general education students can be a challenge in its own right, but learning a foreign language is an even bigger hurdle to overcome.

Betsy Techman, Ileia's Spanish II teacher, and Debra Stoltzfus, a BCIU educational interpreter, help Ileia face this challenge on a daily basis. Mrs. Stoltzfus serves as Ileia's interpreter in all of her academic subjects. She helps Ileia to better understand the teacher and other students in her class by using American Sign Language (ASL) to help Ileia comprehend spoken communication within her classes.

Mrs. Techman and Mrs. Stoltzfus were notified in the fall that Ileia was scheduled for Spanish II beginning in January. They realized they were facing a unique task since Mrs. Stoltzfus does not know Spanish, and Mrs. Techman does not know ASL. Preparation began in

earnest with Mrs. Techman and Mrs. Stoltzfus meeting on a daily basis during their flex periods and after school to confer about new vocabulary, both "sign" and Spanish, in order to effectively teach Ileia when the class began. They have continued to meet throughout the year.

The two educators realized that they would need a creative approach to help Ileia become fluent in Spanish and collaborated to come up with a strategy that would benefit both Ileia and her classmates. Through their collective preparation and teaching experiences, Mrs. Techman and Mrs. Stoltzfus created a unique environment for the class that is exciting and beneficial to all of the students.

The solution involved the Total Physical Response Storytelling (TPRS) teaching method. Another teacher in the school district had recommended that Ileia be assigned to Mrs. Techman's class because of her ten years of experience using TPRS. TPRS is a technique used by some teachers of foreign languages and teachers of English to speakers of other languages to integrate all of the students' senses and accommodate their visual, auditory, and tactile learning abilities.

TPRS encourages teachers to use physical actions and activities to keep students focused while using all of

their senses to learn a language. The combination of TPRS and ASL serves as an excellent teaching tool.

“This approach works very much like a team teaching situation and benefits the entire class,” said Mrs. Techman. “Even advanced language students would benefit from this type of learning atmosphere.”

In previous classes in which she utilized TPRS, Mrs. Techman invented gestures that students would use as they learned vocabulary and conversational speech. In the Spanish II class, Mrs. Stoltzfus serves as a model for sign language usage. Students now learn signs that are not “invented” but rather have a base in American Sign Language (ASL).

“What impresses me the most about the class at Twin Valley is the spirit of collaboration between Mrs. Techman and Mrs. Stoltzfus,” said Dr. Thomas Clouse, BCIU project administrator in the Student and Social Services division. “There’s an excitement that is evident among all the students in the class. These young people are really enjoying their experiences in the classroom.”

Ileia finds the Spanish II class to be a very rewarding and positive experience. “The combination of Spanish and ‘sign’ makes it easier for my classmates and me to learn,” she said. “And, it’s a lot of fun to learn both languages at the same time.”

Ileia’s classmates are enjoying the unique opportunity as well. “Learning Spanish usually comes easily to me, but I’ve always wanted to learn ASL,” said Brittini Brown. “Learning ASL with Spanish helps me learn the signs better and knowing both will help me pursue my career goals.”

“I love this class,” said Kirsten Leighton, another student in the class. “I’ve learned more in this class than I’ve learned in any other Spanish class. It is exciting to learn Spanish and ‘sign’ at the same time.”

Young people, for the most part, have a natural ability to learn new languages, including sign language. They also have a natural curiosity about signing, a curiosity possibly spurred by *Sesame Street* and other television shows featuring deaf or hard-of-hearing characters who sign. This all goes together to make the combination of ASL and TPRS a resounding success at Twin Valley.

Of course, it is not easy to achieve success with an innovative approach. “It is the most

By utilizing Total Physical Response Storytelling and sign language, the students feel they are learning Spanish at a faster rate than with traditional methods.



difficult interpreting situation I have had in my career,” says Mrs. Stoltzfus, “but it is also the most fulfilling. The additional planning and preparation leads to incredible teamwork and fosters a strong inclusionary environment for all the students in the class.”

Ileia plans on studying Spanish III and possibly Spanish IV with a goal of becoming fluent. She feels it will be a huge benefit for her as she hopes to pursue a career in veterinary medicine.

Ileia is one of many students to benefit from the skills of 14 BCIU interpreters who serve deaf or hard-of-hearing students in schools throughout Berks County. The interpreters serve in a variety of settings, from kindergarten through high school, with each utilizing their ability in sign language and education to play a pivotal role in the communication between teachers and students.

For more information, contact Dr. Thomas Clouse at 610-987-8513 or via e-mail at tomclo@berksiu.org.

