Motivational Factors in Learning American Sign Language

Harry G. Lang
Susan Foster
Donna Gustina
Gary Mowl
Yufang Liu
National Technical Institute for the Deaf
Rochester Institute of Technology

This study focuses on factors that motivate and demotivate professionals to learn American Sign Language (ASL). Using a qualitative approach known as the Critical Incident Technique (CIT), faculty and staff were asked to reflect on their sign language learning experiences, and their responses were examined for motivational patterns. Principal motivating factors were intrinsic in nature, including a desire to perform well in one's position, personal goals, and an interest in sign language per se. Integrative factors were also important, especially an interest in social interactions with deaf people. Principal factors that demotivated the respondents were more extrinsic in nature, dealing with workload, scheduling, issues associated with the sign language curriculum, instruction, and the attitudes of self and others. We draw implications from the findings for the enhancement of sign language instruction programs.

Several recent investigations have shown the ability to sign clearly as one of the most important characteristics of effective teachers in classrooms having predominant enrollments of deaf young adult learners. In a structured response study by Lang, McKee, and Conner (1993), 32 teaching characteristics were ranked and rated by classroom teachers, deaf students, and administrators in a large postsecondary program. The ability to sign clearly was both highly ranked and highly rated by all groups in terms of its importance to student learning of course content. In an unstructured response study by Lang, Dowaliby, and Anderson (1994), 839 critical incidents were collected in interviews with 56 deaf students who were asked to reflect on their classroom learning experiences and describe in detail examples of effective and ineffective teaching. Of the 33 characteristics of effective teaching derived from these student reflections, the ability to sign clearly emerged with the highest frequency of occurrence, accounting for 10.4% of the incidents.

With regard to characteristics of effective teaching, these two investigations provided some common results, particularly this focus on the importance of sign communication proficiency. At the same time, however, the employment of different methodologies resulted in certain unique patterns in the perceptions of deaf students. For example, the unstructured response study led to a greater emphasis on affective teaching behaviors. Similar results have been found in critical incident studies with hearing students. While one approach alone would be informative, taken together these structured and unstructured response studies expand our information base considerably.

We applied a similar approach to the study of motivation in adults learning American Sign Language (ASL). In our first study (Lang, Foster, Gustina, Mowl, & Liu, 1996), we used a structured-response measure to identify motivational and attitudinal orientations in learning ASL as a second language. In this study, faculty and staff were free to introduce their own motivational factors (i.e., unstructured responses). The

Correspondence should be sent to Harry Lang, Department of Educational and Career Research, National Technical Institute for the Deaf, 52 Lomb Memorial Drive, Rochester, NY 14623 (e-mail: HGL9008@RIT.EDU).

Copyright © 1996 Oxford University Press. CCC 1081-4959
purpose of this study was to identify the general factors that promote or hinder motivation in learning ASL among hearing professionals who work with deaf persons in an educational institution.

Method

Subjects. Subjects for this study were drawn from the faculty and staff of a large postsecondary program for deaf students, where the acquisition of sign language is an expectation of employment and training in sign language is available and encouraged. In total, 176 persons were sent a packet containing a series of questionnaires, including a background survey, quantitative instruments (Lang et al., 1996) and the qualitative instrument reported in this paper.

The respondent group for the qualitative instrument includes 110 faculty, 44 professional staff, 19 general staff, and three people who did not identify a job category. The primary areas of responsibility of the respondents are shown in Table 1. The hearing faculty and staff respondents in this study were largely experienced employees with 66.1% having worked for 10 or more years at this school and 87.0% reporting more than five years’ experience. One hundred and thirty-two of the 176 respondents (75.0%) had enrolled in five or more ASL courses at this school prior to this investigation, and 78 (44.3%) had studied 10 or more courses.

Instrument. We used the Critical Incident Technique (CIT), an unstructured response method. Flanagan (1954) originally applied the CIT to personnel evaluation and training situations. The method involves the collection of incidents or behaviors from persons who observed them and the subsequent categorization of self-reports into evident dimensions. Respondents were asked to describe in writing three factors that motivated them to learn ASL and three factors that demotivated them. For the purpose of this study, ASL is defined as the range of form from meaning-based, English-like signing with ASL features to more purely structured ASL. There were no restrictions on the length or style of the response; rather, it was open-ended. Responses were coded and studied for patterns and themes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Primary areas of responsibility of respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary area</td>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counseling</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructional development and media specialists</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support department (tutors)</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpreting</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operations/marketing</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clerical</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not respond</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results

Seven hundred and forty-nine responses were received (not everyone listed three motivating factors and three demotivating factors). Four raters then reviewed these written comments. Based on this preliminary analysis, five categories of motivating factors and seven categories of demotivating factors were generated. Each comment was then coded for a specific category by the four raters, working independently. When this activity was completed, the raters met to discuss their coding decisions, comment by comment. For a comment to be retained for further analysis, three out of four raters must have included it in the same category. Analysis of the 723 responses meeting this criterion provide further insight into the adult learner in the professional context and provide implications for ASL instructors. In the following two sections of the article, we describe respondents' comments in detail, using excerpts from their written statements as illustrations. Responses are broadly organized according to whether they were offered as “motivating factors” or “demotivating factors.”

Motivating Factors

As illustrated in Table 2, the 403 comments describing motivating factors were coded within five categories: (1) job-related, (2) interest in language, (3) personal reasons, (4) social interaction, and (5) general communication. When the frequencies of the comments are considered, the “job-related” category was dominant for faculty, with nearly six out of every 10 comments
Table 2  Factors influencing the motivation of adults learning sign language

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Faculty (110)</th>
<th>Professional staff (44)</th>
<th>General staff (19)</th>
<th>Total n (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Motivating factors</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job-related</td>
<td>154 (62.6)</td>
<td>47 (45.2)</td>
<td>32 (60.4)</td>
<td>233 (57.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interest in language</td>
<td>28 (11.4)</td>
<td>20 (19.2)</td>
<td>8 (15.1)</td>
<td>56 (13.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal reasons</td>
<td>28 (11.4)</td>
<td>20 (19.2)</td>
<td>2 (3.8)</td>
<td>50 (12.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social interaction</td>
<td>25 (10.2)</td>
<td>8 (7.7)</td>
<td>7 (13.2)</td>
<td>37 (9.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General communication</td>
<td>11 (4.5)</td>
<td>9 (8.7)</td>
<td>4 (7.5)</td>
<td>27 (6.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>246</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>403</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Demotivating factors</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workload/schedule</td>
<td>41 (19.8)</td>
<td>17 (21.3)</td>
<td>8 (24.2)</td>
<td>66 (20.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sign curriculum</td>
<td>43 (20.8)</td>
<td>11 (13.8)</td>
<td>2 (6.1)</td>
<td>56 (17.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes of others</td>
<td>29 (14.0)</td>
<td>18 (22.5)</td>
<td>6 (18.1)</td>
<td>53 (16.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sign instruction</td>
<td>39 (18.8)</td>
<td>7 (8.8)</td>
<td>4 (12.1)</td>
<td>50 (15.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes of self</td>
<td>20 (9.7)</td>
<td>15 (18.8)</td>
<td>7 (21.1)</td>
<td>42 (13.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School expectations</td>
<td>29 (14.0)</td>
<td>4 (5.0)</td>
<td>4 (12.1)</td>
<td>37 (11.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice opportunity</td>
<td>6 (2.9)</td>
<td>8 (10.0)</td>
<td>2 (6.1)</td>
<td>16 (5.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>207</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>320</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

falling into this category. Professional and general staff also had high frequencies in this category. Additional analysis by category follows.

**Job-related.** For all respondents (faculty and staff), this category accounted for 57.0% of the motivational comments, which were grouped within four subcategories: effectiveness in one's primary area of responsibility, group interactions, institute expectations, and career development. Subcategory analysis provided compelling evidence that faculty and staff are most motivated by the desire to be effective in their primary work, or to interact professionally with deaf colleagues.

Some of the comments regarding effectiveness in their jobs were general. "Performing my job well requires fluency," wrote one respondent. "I desire to perform my job to the best of my ability and the expectations and standards of my supervisors." Others provided detail in describing specific job functions, as in the following example:

In my field, counseling, it is important to notice subtleties in verbal (including signed) and nonverbal behavior. Fluency is important so that I can concentrate on the message and meaning of what a student/client conveys rather than just trying to understand the transmission (so to speak). Sign fluency allows me to do real counseling work which starts with rapport. You can't have as much rapport if you are struggling to understand the signs!

Similarly, teachers described how they wanted to convey clearly their thoughts, ideas, and feelings to their students. During classes, when they saw students who needed a fuller understanding of a concept, they sometimes felt "lost, frustrated, and annoyed" that their sign skills would not permit them to provide instruction more effectively. "I do a lot of interactive work in the classroom," wrote one person, "that is, getting students to discourse with one another. Often I'm embarrassed and ashamed that I don't completely understand. It feels like I get bits and pieces of their dialogue, never the whole." Those who were starting to teach with little or no sign language skills felt they had no contact, bond, or trust. "Frustration" was, in fact, a common word found in the responses of even more experienced teachers. Some teachers emphasized that they wanted to grapple with ideas in class—not with communication issues and styles. Some respondents' comments included introspective reflection on the teaching process, as illustrated by the following three examples:

I was motivated to learn sign language because I wanted to be the best teacher possible for my deaf students. Good teaching requires good communi-
This reality cannot be denied. It is virtually impossible to teach deaf students complex content without effective sign language skills. In fact, I believe a similar comparison can be made for deaf students who have inadequate English skills, in terms of frustration, stress, and an inability to effectively communicate with hearing individuals. It adds a new dimension to teaching.

I found often I was misinterpreting messages because the signs were coming too fast. So I thought the same might be happening to students who were trying to use English.

Certain recent course activities have convinced me that the “way” many of us sign is simply “noninterpretable” without hearing or at least lip reading to fill in gaps or make sense of erroneous signs.

The second largest of the four job-related subcategories pertained to the need to effectively communicate in ASL with deaf colleagues in group meetings, especially committees and department meetings (23.6%). As skills improved, there was a sense of satisfaction and increased relaxed acceptance by deaf peers that proved motivating. In the words of one respondent, “Patience and flexibility of deaf people was a strong factor in my motivation to improve.” Interaction with deaf faculty, staff, and students in groups provided the respondents with unique opportunities to know and understand learning needs and behaviors. “It was important for me in order to work collaboratively with my deaf colleagues—on committees, workshops. I want communication to flow easily with deaf colleagues and friends. I want to earn the respect of my coworkers and friends. I want our interactions to be as unencumbered as possible.” Other respondents emphasized the need to improve their sign language proficiency—for their own sake. As one person commented, the “need to know what’s going on at department meetings, in hallway conversations, etc, is a real motivating force in learning sign language.”

School expectations for ASL proficiency for promotion and tenure were mentioned as a motivating factor in nearly two out of every 10 of the job-related responses. These respondents basically accepted the notion of sign proficiency as an institute “requirement” of the job. As one respondent wrote, “If I worked in Japan, I would be expected to learn Japanese.”

Lastly, the opportunity for advancement (i.e., career development) as a motive was described in 13.3% of the job-related responses. For example, one person explained that “the jobs I am interested in require extensive sign language knowledge—I could not get a promotion without advanced skills.” Others mentioned specific goals, such as receiving the Deaf Studies Certificate or becoming an interpreter.

Interest in language. The second largest category of responses regarding motivating factors (13.9%) related to a fascination with the visual beauty of. As one person said, “sign was intriguing, beautiful, honest.” Another felt that ASL could express ideas that have no expression in other languages: “Some languages appear cold and stoic to me. Some are boring and do not stir my emotions. American Sign Language is very intimate and meaningful. It sometimes express an emotion that no word could ever express. It reaches my soul.” Over time, this fascination with sign language proved a motivation for learning:

For someone totally unfamiliar with sign language, I couldn’t take my eyes off of people using it. The more I learn about sign and ASL, the more intrigued I become with the concept of a visual language—how is our thinking shaped by visual language—how it differs from aural/oral language; how visual literacy is developed, etc.

Personal reasons. The category of motivational factors associated with personal goals or experiences (12.4%) included a high “achievement motivation” that suggests one respondent, “led me to try to be the best I can be at everything I do.” Comments in this category did not specifically relate to one’s job. Another person wrote, “I have never liked being average and have quit/dropped only activities for which I did not show aptitude.” Some felt learning sign language gave them a broader perspective on the world:

By communicating with deaf people, I have more insights into what different people think, “hear”,

Interest in language.
feel, and experience in life. I find it broadens my perspectives and understandings.

There were also both general and specific comments about the value of positive feedback from deaf students and colleagues as a personal motivational factor. In the words of one respondent, “Success breeds success.” Others were motivated by watching hearing colleagues who sign fluently. Also mentioned were the patience of students during the first few months of teaching and private tutoring early in one’s experience while learning ASL. Respondents described specific individuals who personally motivated them, including ASL instructors, friends, peers, chairpersons, relatives, and interpreters.

**Social interaction.** The desire for effective social interaction accounted for 9.2% of the comments regarding motivating factors. This category included the desire to interact with deaf people in general, as well as interest in developing friendships with a specific deaf person. The following quotations are illustrative:

Wanting to interact with deaf people. Specifically, the more sign language I learned, the more deaf friends I made, and the more deaf friends I got to know, the more my sign language improved.

The basis of all friendships is good communication and compromise. In a deaf-hearing friendship, I feel it is my responsibility to communicate as clearly as I possibly can and in turn, my friend has the same responsibility. Meeting each other halfway is what real friendship is all about.

**General communication.** Motivation as a sense of “fairness” prevailed among many respondents, who felt that it was important to communicate well with everyone with whom they worked. This category accounted for 6.7% of the comments regarding motivation. “I felt it was important as a staff member,” wrote one individual, “to learn American Sign Language and to learn about deaf culture.” Another explained that the decision to work in a setting where ASL is used carries with it the obligation to learn the language:

If I choose to work/live in a place that speaks a language other than my own, I am obligated to learn the language of the region—not require them to adapt to me.

Those new to the environment usually felt left out of many social/casual conversations. Formal situations were usually handled by the presence of an interpreter. They felt embarrassed and very uncomfortable because they could not communicate. In the words of one person, “when I first got here I felt very isolated because I wasn’t able to talk to deaf people I worked with or met while working here. I felt I was missing out by not being able to engage in more than extremely superficial conversations with most of the deaf people I’d meet.” Others felt it was an issue of respecting students needs/rights. “All students have the right to expect that their environment will make every effort to communicate regardless of their orientation, i.e., spoken English or ASL.” Another wrote that “it seemed to me that deaf students and colleagues spend their whole life trying to find ways to communicate with me—I felt I could at least try to meet them halfway.” Regardless, the ability to sign was seen as essential in the environment, whether it be in the classroom, office, or anywhere in the buildings—deaf students ask questions of anyone deaf or hearing, and the skill needed to respond effectively is critical.

**Demotivating Factors**

Analysis of the respondents’ 320 comments regarding factors that have a negative impact on their learning of ASL yielded seven categories (Table 2): (1) workload/schedule, (2) sign language curriculum, (3) attitudes of others, (4) sign instruction, (5) attitudes of self, (6) school expectations, and (7) practice opportunities.

With frequencies of comments considered, faculty and staff workloads, the sign language curriculum, attitudes of others, and the quality of sign instruction appear as dominant factors with regard to demotivating experiences. We describe these and other categories in more depth below.

**Workload/scheduling.** Of the 320 comments offered about factors that demotivate faculty and staff, 20.6% focused on the issues of workload, scheduling, and the concern about time constraints. Time away from the
desk meant more pressure when they returned after sign class. Some felt discouraged that while sign language proficiency is described as a priority by the school, other responsibilities assigned by supervisors often made it difficult to pursue sign communication skills development. The conflict between "trying to work in a very fast-paced, high-pressured office and justifying leaving work to attend sign classes" proved a barrier to learning sign. For those whose schedules were already overloaded, finding time to attend sign class was difficult if not impossible. And as the following comment illustrates, learning sign language can be very time consuming for some respondents:

Amount of time required to really master sign. What can I say—we all know the pressures around here now. A three-hour [sign language] course, plus a minimum of two hours outside of class is five hours a week or about 10% of our work week. That is a major chunk of time for most of us.

Nineteen of the respondents' comments indicated that some professionals were less motivated when they could not find a good fit of available instruction in the free times in their schedules. Most often the difficulties revolved around finding times to attend sign classes that do not conflict with teaching schedules, committee work, and regular department or team meetings.

Sign language curriculum. Fifty-six (17.5%) of the comments pertained to negative experiences of the respondents in sign language courses. The most frequently cited factor associated with the curriculum was the perception that the courses were too general, lacking in variety and challenge. One third of all the comments related to this factor. Other factors of note included the heterogeneity of the language skill level of the learners in their classes, the lack of application in the courses (particularly to simultaneous communication experiences, which most teachers use in their own teaching), and assessment within the sign language courses. In the words of one respondent, "I'm . . . sick of inappropriate people being placed in high level ASL courses. [The] course is ultimately brought down to their level."

Several respondents believed that interaction between professionals and students in their courses was missing and that such would be beneficial. Other factors mentioned by respondents included the structure of classes offered, with several expressing preference to learn on their own, using self-paced resources; or sign courses that meet their special needs for skills development (for example, an individual was interested in learning how to do a professional presentation to a "mixed" audience—hearing and deaf—in sign-supported English). Some observed a need for more consistent feedback from instructors or had lost some motivation because of the final exam interview at the end of each course. ("I get so nervous and literally 'freeze' and usually do very poorly during the final test."

The institution of sign language course grades discouraged six respondents; one expressed the perception that grades were "demeaning the integrity of the professor . . . I could see myself beginning to 'work for a grade' rather than learn the content, and that is silly and unproductive." Another felt that "meaningful and consistent benchmarks to self-monitor and maintain direction and commitment" were missing. This respondent continued, "At the end of the first three sign courses, I knew I had responsibility and command of about 600 English term equivalents. I have felt somewhat more adrift ever since. . . . I need internal benchmarks."

Courses tailored to the educational classroom experiences and skills needed in the classroom were preferred by a few responding teachers:

[I see] little, if any, transfer of sign skills from [sign language] classes to my classroom or to social situations. I'll put time into sign classes and for some reason I see little actual transfer to the classroom. I'm delighted when I see the transfer; discouraged when I don't.

[I prefer] methods and resources that relate to my needs as an educator. Fewer tapes and examples of stories and interaction in social contexts. I tutor abstract concepts in math and statistics and computer applications. I would like to see examples/samples of student[s] coming in with problems and modeled responses.

Attitudes of others. Fifty-one comments (15.9%) about experiences that had a negative influence on motivation related to the attitude of others. For example, respon-
ents were discouraged when they felt that deaf persons “looked down on” or “bad mouthed” them because their signing was progressing slowly or they were unable to communicate in ASL. For one respondent, this experience “hits a ‘nerve’ and makes me less motivated to learn. I learn best in a supportive rather than adversarial environment.” Another reported that “when I hear deaf professionals complain about the skills and motivation of hearing faculty regarding sign language, I become very discouraged.” Occasionally, respondents reported experiences in which they were ridiculed for their lack of proficiency, as in the following comment:

Deaf individuals who use their language as a means of testing, teasing, or embarrassing others. Teasing an individual by signing real fast or spelling something just to test the other person’s proficiency.

Another group of comments about attitude focused on the perception that some deaf people take an extreme view regarding sign language, that is, ASL is the only acceptable form of sign language, or voice should not be used at all when signing. This perceived extremism was also characterized as an unwillingness to accept a diverse range of views and the sense that one must be either “for us” or “against us,” with no middle ground or potential for dialogue. The following comments explain:

Extremism on the part of a minority deaf faction trying to force their viewpoints on all others. I see this as “anti-diversity”. i.e., only ASL, no voice, no lip, etc.

Deaf militancy. No one should have such belligerent attitudes and be nonaccepting of one’s differences. Communication is a two-way process, equal responsibility.

Closely related to the comments described above is the feeling expressed by some respondents that politics have taken over the discussion and practice of sign language in the school. As revealed by the comments below, this can result in a belief that students are not being well served, strained relationships with deaf colleagues, and a growing sense of “majority/minority” rather than collegial interaction:

I am less motivated to improve my sign language skills because the politics of sign language has become more important than the deaf students we serve. Deaf militants continue to push ASL down everyone’s throat even though fifty percent of our students come from mainstreamed programs. ASL is not the most effective means of communicating with many of our students yet this “power play” continues to separate and divide us with little thought given to how all our students will best learn in the classroom.

Political differences. I don’t know if I am all for ASL, and it’s considered heresy by the Deaf community. I feel more isolated by politics now, from my deaf friends.

The political reality of being from the majority. It is difficult to face the fears and insecurity of interpersonal relationships with a group who do not identify their language preferences honestly. I mean what is SimCom to deaf people—oppression or insight?

Sign language instruction. Fifty comments (15.6%) focused on sign language instruction. Of these, 70% were associated with the perception that the sign language teachers the respondents studied under were not trained well to teach adult learners. Twenty-eight of these 35 comments focused on the quality of instruction in general, while the remaining seven specifically mentioned the teacher as not being perceived as a bilingual (i.e., able to communicate in both ASL and English, signed or spoken). Of the remaining 15 comments, 13 described sign teachers as either boring (8) or insensitive (5). In some cases, the instructors were perceived as critical, impatient, unmotivated, or unprepared. In other cases, responders felt that the teacher approached the instruction from a political perspective rather than a linguistic perspective, as the following example shows:

Politically-based instructor attitudes. The joy of language learning was sometimes negated by the persistent negativity of the instructor as his/her political/social/linguistic views permeated the learning process. My acceptance of Deaf culture
was set back for years until I re-found the satisfaction of cross-cultural participation in other, more positive ways.

Some respondents commented on specific methods used by sign instructors. One person felt that his time was wasted because there was “too much emphasis on watching other hearing people in sign classes. . . . I spent hours watching hearing people sign poorly.” Another felt less motivated because the instructor had a habit of leaving the room while the class was left to “learn by videotapes.”

Teacher affect was another factor. Instructors who were perceived as not liking hearing people or who failed to present a balanced perspective regarding oral and sign communication were sometimes suggested as reasons for becoming less motivated:

Teacher had a ‘Deaf Power’ agenda, and showed that [he/she] did not like hearing people.

Instructors’ (apparent) attitudes towards signed English and any topic related to speech communication (oral education, lipreading, etc.). Every course I attended included at least one story—provided for receptive practice, usually—that touted the evils of oralism. There was never any attempt to provide a balance, despite the varied educational backgrounds of our students. Opinions on adults’ responses to speech instruction were mindlessly extended to education of children. There was no concern for the difference between fact and isolated personal experiences.

Attitudes of self. Fears of failure, rejection, and embarrassment were mentioned in 13.1% of the comments. These respondents expressed concern that their “initial feeble attempts” at signed conversations would be unacceptable or ridiculed. They feared using incorrect signs and not being understood. Sometimes the anxiety was expressed in terms of sign language classroom situations, especially when classmates were more fluent than the respondent. In other cases, the anxiety was generalized to any situation in which the respondents felt self-conscious about their sign ability. Some examples follow:

My own inhibitions/insecurities. I don’t like having my lack of competence in signing exposed. I become very self conscious and tense, especially in a competitive environment.

Embarrassment or self-consciousness in classes with much better signers. Frustration and impatience with myself. Becoming fluent in sign language is much more difficult than it is perceived to be by the public.

Comprehension frustrations. I was learning to express myself (or so I thought) with sign better and more quickly than I was able to understand another’s signs. Receptive fingerspelling has always been a problem for me.

School expectations. The sixth largest category of factors (11.6%) was the expectations of the school signaled by policy. For these respondents, making specific levels of sign proficiency a condition for promotion and tenure had affected their motivation negatively. As one person noted, “when I wanted to learn sign language to communicate with colleagues and friends, my motivation was higher than when the [school] said I must learn sign language.” Another respondent remarked that the establishment of school requirements for learning sign language had reduced the activity to “a contractual training activity. . . . [that] tends to replace the once important ‘desire’ to learn and grow in our knowledge about deafness. My desire to grow in my ability to communicate has been replaced by more work-related expectation. It has become depersonalized.” For these individuals, intrinsic, or self, motivation is more important than extrinsic motivation such as that exerted by the school.

Some respondents were discouraged by their perception that they had to “relearn” how to sign. Many had learned sign language before the Institute had developed a curriculum that taught ASL as a second language. Most had learned signs for English words. Very little ASL grammar or information about Deaf culture was included in the previous curriculum. The emphasis on signed English, they perceived, was no longer the “acceptable way.” Several felt that sign language proficiency was not considered an important priority by their chairpeople, since these skills were not evaluated by them. Encouragement to develop sign language
communication proficiency was rare. There was also
the perception of a lack of appreciation from adminis-
trators for the struggle to learn sign language. “An atti-
dute exists which is one of tolerating an employee’s
absence from daily job to attend classes but not ap-
preciated,” wrote one respondent. “There seems to be
some inequality in ‘time away’ from job between fac-
ulty and staff.”

Thirteen of the responses associated with school
expectations focused on the evaluation process known
as the Sign Communication Proficiency Interview
(SCPI). For these respondents, the experience was
negative due to individual interviewers or to the fact
that their ratings seemed to be lower than expected.

The subjectiveness of the SCPI. I took the SCPI
twice with two sign classes sandwiched between—
no improvement. I don’t understand how 13 years
ago I learned very quickly and now I am incapable
of learning—I don’t think so. I am in favor of the
SCPI as long as a curriculum is in place to bring
people along.

Practice opportunity. The final category of factors (5.0%) related mostly to the lack of opportunities to practice what is learned. For some respondents, their job at the school did not bring them into daily contact with deaf persons, which made it difficult for them to practice what they were learning in sign class. Others felt that the inability to use sign language outside of work made it difficult to improve their skill level. As one person commented, “I am an adult with a personal and private life outside of [this school] and Deaf Culture. I’m not able to commit many hours to events outside of work which I know would enhance my skills.”

Discussion

The purpose of this investigation was to identify gen-
eral factors that motivate and demotivate hearing adult
learners of ASL. No effort was made to identify when
the sign language learning experiences occurred, since
the study was not meant to evaluate curriculum or in-
structional effectiveness. While some respondents indi-
cated their experiences were more recent, others re-
sponded that the sources of motivation or demotivation
were experienced as long as 10 or 15 years earlier.
Regardless of when the learning experience occurred,
however, the perceptions of the respondents represent
their reflections on their learning experiences, and
these factors should be considered when planning and
evaluating ASL—teacher training programs.

The fact that 143 of the 403 positive comments
(35.5%) collected pertained to professionals wanting to
be the best they can be in their positions attests to an
intrinsic motivation that could likely be enhanced by
knowledgeable and sensitive ASL instructors who rec-
ognize the professional development potential within
their power. Similarly, a love for learning ASL as
a unique language and the desire for effective social
interactions are motivating forces that teachers may
capitalize on in both introductory and advanced ASL
courses. These factors are likely generalizable to other
academic environments.

Two of the categories of factors that negatively
affect learning of ASL identified in this study (work-
load/scheduling and school expectations) are related
strongly to school management and policy. Faculty and
staff respondents felt their workload and schedule con-
flicts discouraged them from pursuing ASL skills de-
velopment as much as they would like. Two out of every
10 comments related to these issues, indicating a need
for administrators in schools to examine possible ways
to ameliorate such concern.

As for the school’s policy, 11.6% of the negative
comments related to the established levels of profi-
ciency in ASL for tenure and promotion. On the other
hand, 14.6% of the positive comments about being mo-
tivated pertained to school policy. The policies in this
school were implemented by vote of the faculty and
were relatively new at the time the study was con-
ducted. Further investigation of attitudinal change
over time may provide insight into the role of policy in
this complex interplay of intrinsic and extrinsic forces.

In this investigation, aspects of sign language
courses accounted for 18.8% of the negative com-
ments, and 15.6% were related to sign language in-
struction. Thus, more than one third of all comments
about being less motivated pertained to the direct sign
language learning experience. Gardner and Tremblay
(1994) reviewed many studies on motivation and sec-
ond language acquisition in general, summarizing that
motivation involves a desire to learn the material and favorable attitude associated with learning the material. With regard to this study, additional research on perceptions of instruction and curriculum is clearly needed. ASL teacher training personnel may also benefit from the research findings in studies with foreign language teachers. For example, Moskowitz (1976) concluded from her study that "outstanding teachers used a number of indirect behaviors, such as praising, joking, and personalizing questions, significantly more direct behaviors, such as directing drills and criticizing student behaviors, significantly less than typical teachers" (p. 135). The comments from the respondents in this study support these suggestions.

In addition to the logistical and curriculum/teaching clusters, a third cluster of factors having a negative impact on motivation related to the attitudes of self and the attitudes of others, accounting for three out of every 10 of the negative comments. The qualitative data in this study indicate that such attitudes play an important role in motivation and possibly affect achievement in ASL courses. Additional research on the attitudinal dimensions of deaf-hearing relationships in the context of ASL learning is warranted. In some cases, the "philosophy" of an ASL curriculum might not be clearly communicated. We agree with McKee and McKee (1992), for example, who write that "since code-switching and mixing is a sociolinguistic characteristic of the Deaf community (Cokely 1984, Lucas & Valli 1989), perhaps it needs to be explicitly defined as such in the ASL classroom, in order to lessen teachers' and students' sense of frustration that something is 'wrong' when they experience code-switching in hearing-Deaf encounters" (p. 154). Moreover, as Schumann (1976) explains, social solidarity and, consequently, a good language learning situation, will exist when the second language learning group is neither dominant nor subordinate to the target language group.

Beyond the categorizing of motivational factors and the study of patterns across categories, several themes emerged regarding the relationship between motivation and the teaching and learning of ASL. In the concluding section of this article, we describe these themes and offer recommendations for further research.

First, in an academic environment such as that studied in this investigation, there may be a complex interaction of motivational factors people experience with regard to learning ASL as a second language. The politics of culture and language, personal as well as professional values and goals, the extrinsic rewards of salary increments, promotion, and tenure, and other forces present conflict in some learners. For example, several respondents described a tone of increasingly political and confrontational activism on campus regarding the attainment of sign language proficiency to professional advancement. Further research is recommended to determine the long-term impact of these trends on motivation to learn sign language, particularly within professional contexts.

A second theme involves the application of prescriptive guidelines to professional development expectations for college faculty. While college faculty traditionally have been expected to meet certain criteria for promotion and tenure, they have also been granted a certain amount of leeway regarding individual interpretations and expressions of these criteria. The sign language policy, however, recommends specific levels of proficiency using a single assessment tool. Some faculty resist these policies because they may perceive them as restricting academic freedom. What is the relationship between required levels of proficiency in ASL and academic freedom? How do these policies affect the traditions of the university culture? These and other questions deserve further investigation.

Still another theme suggested by the data is the shifting definition of individual empowerment and responsibility. Prior to the establishment of college standards for sign language, faculty had both the power to define the parameters of their skill development and the responsibility to attain appropriate levels of skill. The college's establishment of expectations for sign language proficiency shifted some power from individual faculty to the college. At the same time, the responsibility for faculty development shifted from primarily a faculty-centered responsibility to a shared responsibility between the college and the individual employee. Faced with a new set of professional demands that are critical to career development, faculty have begun to
hold the college accountable for appropriate professional development opportunities. They are demanding specific topics in sign language and Deaf culture and have become both more informed of their needs and more vocal about their rights as learners. In response, there have been significant changes in the structure and curriculum of sign language courses at the college. Other schools may wish to investigate the implications of school policies for empowerment and their relationship to proficiency in ASL.

In summary, a variety of motivational factors come into play that may influence the learning of ASL. Understanding the differences in patterns of motivations among faculty and staff grouped by professional types, as well as the social, political, cultural, and other themes that emerge and influence learning, may be helpful in developing a strongly motivated learning community as well as in guiding course development and ASL teacher training. The results of this study indicate that institutional policy, ASL teachers, and collegial interactions all have the potential to influence the motivation of adult learners. In particular, ASL teachers have the challenge of ameliorating fear, embarrassment, and other emotions and attitudes that may interfere with learning. To enhance learning of ASL, schools and other professional settings where sign language fluency is an expectation of employment would do well to consider the institutional, political, curricular, and individual conditions that motivate adult learners.

Note

1. The use of the uppercase “Deaf” is generally used to refer to a group of deaf people who share a language—American Sign Language—and a culture, while the lowercase “deaf” refers to the audiological condition of not hearing (Padden & Humphries, 1988; Woodward, 1972).

References