



Crossing the Divide: The Bilingual Grammar Curriculum, by Todd Czubek

In S. R. Leigh & E. Andrews (Eds.), *Discussing bilingualism in deaf children: Essays in Honor of Robert Hoffmeister* (pp. 173–193). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780367808686>

Review of “Crossing the Divide” by Vassilis Kourbetis

In his chapter *Crossing the Divide: The Bilingual Grammar Curriculum*, Todd Czubek examines the long-standing challenges in Deaf Education and presents an innovative framework for bilingual grammar instruction. For decades, language instruction for Deaf and hard-of-hearing students has been shaped by models developed for spoken and written languages, often failing to consider the unique visual-spatial structures of signed languages. Czubek’s work explores this divide, offering insights into why conventional curricula fall short and how the **Bilingual Grammar Curriculum (BGC)** provides a structured, bilingual approach that integrates both ASL and English in a meaningful way.

The Challenge: Incompatible Systems

For decades, educators have sought ways to incorporate American Sign Language (ASL) meaningfully into language arts instruction. However, the prevailing trend has been to “work backward,” adapting existing spoken/written language curricula to signed languages rather than creating a curriculum that respects the unique structures of ASL. Most schools still rely on traditional English-based literacy standards without considering how Deaf students access language differently. As a result, grammar instruction remains inaccessible to many, leading to widespread struggles with literacy and language development.

In an informal survey of 15 schools self-identifying as bilingual, 14 reported little to no coordination between their ASL and English programming. This disconnect reinforces a long-standing problem: language instruction is often designed for hearing students and then retrofitted for Deaf learners, rather than developing a model from the ground up that centers on their actual linguistic needs.

Breaking the Mold: The Santa Fe/New York City Template

To challenge these outdated models, Todd Czubek and Kristin DiPerri, co-authors of the BGC, developed a new framework for understanding ASL and English. A key conceptual breakthrough came from an unexpected source—urban zoning laws. Czubek explains that English follows a "Santa Fe model," where zoning laws restrict buildings to a single-story, linear layout—just like the sequential structure of spoken and written languages. ASL, on the other hand, operates like a "New York City model," where language can be constructed outward and upward, utilizing multiple layers of meaning simultaneously.

This metaphor helps students and educators understand that ASL is not a broken or abbreviated form of English—it is a fully realized linguistic system that operates within a different spatial framework. Recognizing these differences is essential for developing effective bilingual instruction.

A Revolutionary Approach to Bilingual Grammar Instruction

The BGC is the **first curriculum of its kind** to develop a grammar progression based on the structure of a signed language. Instead of using a "hearing-first" approach, the BGC ensures that students build grammar knowledge in ASL **before** transitioning to English grammar instruction. The sequence is deliberately structured to prioritize conceptual understanding in ASL, ensuring that students have a strong foundation before tackling English grammar.

The curriculum is structured around **Anchor Standards**, each of which is divided into **Benchmarks** that guide students through three stages of learning:

1. **Concept-building** (establishing foundational understanding in ASL)
2. **Articulating/defining grammar features** (clarifying rules and structures)
3. **Application and evaluation** (applying knowledge to communication and literacy tasks)

Students must **demonstrate mastery in ASL** before proceeding to equivalent English grammar lessons. This ensures that English grammar concepts are not introduced in isolation but are deeply connected to a student's prior ASL knowledge.

Real-World Impact and Teacher Support

One of the most exciting aspects of the BGC is its comprehensive online platform (<https://www.bgcasl.org>), which provides educators with a **structured, research-based** approach to bilingual grammar instruction. With over 300 objectives and lesson plans, (only in Level 1) the BGC offers:

- Step-by-step guidance on teaching grammar concepts in ASL and English
- Native user signing examples and video resources
- Printable activities and assessments
- Hands-on lesson plans designed for visual learners

By giving teachers a fully developed curriculum, the BGC removes the guesswork and provides a clear roadmap for success in bilingual grammar education.

The Journey Ahead

Language learning is no “day sail”—it is a long and challenging voyage. But as history has shown, the most significant achievements come from perseverance and innovation. The BGC represents a seismic shift in Deaf Education, offering a curriculum that truly values ASL as a linguistic foundation for literacy development.

As Czubek reminds us, great challenges require bold solutions. Just as explorers, astronauts, and visionaries before us have dared to cross the divide, the BGC invites educators to reimagine bilingual grammar instruction and embark on a journey that ensures **Deaf and hard-of-hearing students thrive as bilingual language users.**

Further Reading:

Czubek, T. (2021). *Crossing the divide: The Bilingual Grammar Curriculum*. In S. R. Leigh & E. Andrews (Eds.), *Discussing bilingualism in deaf children: Essays in Honor of Robert Hoffmeister* (pp. 173–193). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780367808686>