

A Case for Fingerspelling Spelling Tests

Heather R Lawson, CI & CT

Debates and opinions abound on the topic of interpreting spelling tests. Many people say an interpreter should sign the spelling word or a conceptual equivalent, if there is no specific sign. Others say words without specific signs should be fingerspelled. Still others suggest giving a definition, using Cued Speech, Visual Phonics, or redesigning the test so the student identifies the correctly or incorrectly spelled word from a list or passage. After some research, I believe spelling tests should be interpreted using fluent fingerspelling.

Teachers who administer spelling tests by reading the words aloud and using it in a sentence are testing the students' knowledge of spelling; however, when an interpreter signs a word, she is testing the students on the word's definition. Interpreting a test in this manner requires the deaf student to identify the concept being signed, find the correct English equivalent for the word being tested, and then spell it. We typically do not ask a hearing student to look at a picture and spell the word, nor do we give them the definition only and ask them to spell the word, so why would we ask this of our deaf students? By fingerspelling the word fluently (at a normal conversational pace), we are asking the deaf student to do the same as the hearing student: recognize the word and spell it.

A frequent argument against fingerspelling for spelling tests is that you are actually spelling the word to the student. However, fingerspelled words are read as a unit, not as individual letters. When reading a book, or even this essay, we read each word as a unit, not as individual letters. In addition, we do not process every letter of every word we read, just as every letter of a fingerspelled word is not processed and remembered. The most important letters in a fingerspelled word are the first and last letters; everything in the middle often becomes a blur of shapes. Some spellers, and at some speeds, vowels can be dropped from the middle of the word. Even spelling accurately, a person can rarely see every letter of a fingerspelled word, just like when speaking, we don't attend to each sound in the word, rather we hear the entire word. If the student is familiar with the word, he will be able to spell it. If he is not familiar with the word, he probably will not be able to pick out all the letters from a fluent fingerspeller.

Finally, fingerspelling provides orthographic information that closer approximates the information provided in the spoken version of the word. For example, when a word is spoken the student has an opportunity to hear its approximate length; fingerspelling would give the student access to this information more readily than a sign or sign-string for the word. Also, when the word is spoken, one can hear the syllables and inflection given to parts of the word, assisting in spelling the word. This is also true for fingerspelling, but it is not always true for a signed word. Finally, the hearing student can hear the phonemes (phonics) that make up the word, thus has clues from the sounds to assist them in spelling the word. Similarly, a deaf student presented with a fluently fingerspelled word will have clues in the form of letter shapes to assist them in spelling the word.

In order to provide deaf and hard of hearing students with equivalent access to a spelling test, an interpreter should fingerspell the words because it tests spelling skills instead of definition recognition. Fingerspelling functions as a word unit in the language and provides orthographic information similar to that found in spoken presentation of spelling words.