

Changchun 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration  
September 2007  
Special Education College

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I am very honored to be asked to come and speak with you here today. Thank you.

I come to you with the knowledge that individuals who are deaf, barring other difficulties unrelated to deafness, are capable of high achievement if they have access to education. Why do I believe that? I come from a family of four generations of deaf persons. Many of my deaf relatives earned college degrees and held professional jobs, even in the late 1800s. My grandfather, great uncle, and parents were teachers of subjects like English and math. My uncle held a doctorate and was the Dean of Students and Director of the Counseling Center at Gallaudet University. I grew up knowing, because I saw, in my family and in the local and national deaf communities, that deaf people CAN achieve almost anything if they have accommodations like interpreting/signing which create access to education and work.

You are establishing very exciting and important new programs in the teaching and researching of Chinese Sign Language (CSL). It is just such knowledge and skills that can widen the doors of education for young Chinese deaf students through using CSL for teaching and interpreting. The more that is known about the grammar of CSL, the more accurate and complete the transfer of information can be. You have a saying that it is better to teach a person how to fish than to give them fish. Equally it is our role as educators to open doors through access to information so that deaf persons can achieve. They do not need or want charity, rather they want the same opportunities that are available to hearing peers to study for a career.

We recently completed a study of postsecondary education in China for deaf persons, with the help of many, many people, including some who are here with us today. The interviews included deaf and hearing persons. I believe that you have copies of that full report here today. However today I will only talk about the communication aspects of this study.

Why are these new programs so very important?

1. Every single deaf person interviewed in the study indicated that their highest priority for improvement of education was improvement in teacher's sign

language abilities. Deaf individuals indicated that they often did not understand all of the instruction in classes. One administrator estimated that only about 20% of spoken Chinese is easily visible on the lips due to the 4 tones. This means that deaf students are depending heavily upon guesswork in the classroom unless the signing is very fluent.

2. It was clear in the study that faculty are very motivated to learn sign language well, but because there were few programs established to teach them, most learned by themselves as best they could through books and from students. Your program could strongly improve the sign ability of faculty, and thus student learning.
  
3. Students who wish to major in mainstream programs currently cannot do that because they do not have interpreters. Thus their opportunities are limited to majors offered in programs for deaf students only. The field of deafness is a small one, and deaf individuals here are very well aware of the successes of deaf persons across the world. They know that there are deaf doctors, lawyers, engineers, college faculty, linguists, and so on, in other countries (For example, there are currently approximately 40 doctors in the United States who are deaf. Included in this number are Dr. Carolyn Stern, a physician who works with an interpreter seated in back of her hearing patients, Dr. Angela Earhart who is an obstetrician, and Dr. Kimberly Dodge, a veterinarian who does surgery; all practicing in the Rochester, New York community. Technological devices such as electronic stethoscopes that show heartbeats visually, clear surgical masks for lipreading, real-time transcriptionists recording conversation in typed script, text pagers, and so on, have made it possible to overcome environmental barriers.) However, first they had to have full access to education before they could succeed.

Deaf respondents and many faculty members noted a strong desire among deaf individuals for a college education and for expanded opportunities to study more than art and information technology. If more opportunities were available for such an education, deaf students would aspire to fill those programs, and administrators say they would welcome those new students, as long as they were qualified.

4. CSL research is important in order to improve the teaching and use of sign language. Understanding and knowing the correct grammar of any language is critical to correct use. Further, knowledge of CSL grammar can allow CSL to be used as a bridge to learning written Chinese. It would allow deaf persons to go from what they know already to what is new and difficult to learn. For example, using ASL, teachers can demonstrate the way to form a passive sentence first in ASL and then in English. "The car hit the tree" is an

active sentence, but “The tree was hit by the car” is passive. Those are signed differently too (demonstrate) such that in the active sentence the car is first and close to the body and moves out and away to the tree in front and then hits it. In the passive sentence the tree is mentioned first, signed close to the body and the car comes from away to the tree. Students know the difference in sign language but do not know how to express that in English. In this way sign language acts as a bridge to another language.

5. Last, but perhaps most important, studying and teaching CSL demonstrates respect and acceptance of the language used by Deaf persons, and therefore respect and acceptance of Deaf persons themselves, as people. I remember when I told my mother, in the early 1970s, that I was studying the grammar of ASL, that she was shocked. After a long silence she said bitterly, “I was always taught that ASL was not a real language; that it was “bad English”. I was taught that only English was good and I learned to look down on ASL used in my own family. Now in my old age, I learn that it is a language with grammar and rules, that I could have been proud of both of my languages!” Often deaf people were ashamed to admit that they signed, or signed “very small” in public (demonstrate). No one should have to be ashamed of their language.

### Who are the experts in sign language teaching and research?

Teachers of any language must be fluent in the language they teach. This person could be a long time teacher from a School for the Deaf, could be a child of deaf family, or could be a deaf person. The best is a native signer, however not all children from a deaf family can sign well, and not all deaf persons sign well (just as not all Chinese speak good Chinese). How can you find out if a person is truly fluent in the language? The deaf respondents in this study emphasized evaluation of sign skills by a group of deaf teachers, deaf leaders, and if possible, by deaf persons who have studied CSL as a language. They are the experts from whom we learn.

With regard to sign language research, again it is the deaf individuals who are the experts in CSL, while the researcher is the expert in research analysis. This requires a true partnership and respect for the deaf individual. Thus sign language research consists of two experts sharing their information and knowledge. Sign language research must be a respectful study of a wonderful and complete language used by a group of very special people who must consent to sharing their language, and who should benefit from the study in some way. Susan Fischer is soon publishing an excellent paper entitled “Sign Language Field Methods: Approaches, Techniques, and Concerns” which I highly recommend for the future sign language researchers. She has been conducting sign language research for 35 years and her paper will discuss

various very important issues and approaches that she has found to be successful over the years.

## Conclusion

Deaf and hearing people working in partnership, can take advantage of the knowledge, creativity, and experience of the deaf individual regarding language use and that of the hearing partner to create the knowledge that paves the way for future educational successes of bright deaf individuals.

China has placed great value on bringing people who are deaf into society and is moving very quickly to make this a reality. Your college was the first to offer a special program to educate deaf people at the college level. Now your new programs are moving to further improve and expand the educational opportunities for deaf people. Once again you are in the forefront, and I look forward to seeing this exciting program as it develops.