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The Question of Sign-Language and the Utility of Signs in the Instruction of the Deaf: Two Papers by Alexander Graham Bell (1898) FREE

The Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education, Volume 10, Issue 2, 1 March 2005, Pages 111–121, <https://doi.org/10.1093/deafed/eni012>

Published: 01 March 2005

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Abstract

Alexander Graham Bell is often portrayed as either hero or villain of deaf individuals and the Deaf community. His writings, however, indicate that he was neither, and was not as clearly definite in his beliefs about language as is often supposed. The following two articles, reprinted from *The Educator* (1898), Vol. V, pp. 3–4 and pp. 38–44, capture Bell's thinking about sign language and its use in the classroom. Contrary to frequent claims, Bell does not demand “oral” training for all deaf children – even if he thinks it is the superior alternative – but does advocate for it for “the semi-deaf” and “the semi-mute.” “In regard to the others,” he writes, “I am not so sure.” Although he clearly voices his support for oral methods and fingerspelling (the Rochester method) over sign language, Bell acknowledges the use and utility of signing in a carefully-crafted discussion that includes both linguistics and educational philosophy. In separating the language used at home from that in school and on the playground, Bell reveals a far more complex view of language learning by deaf children than he is often granted. (M. Marschark)

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