

Growing up with Signing Exact English: The Lived Experiences of Deaf Adults

Amy Peterson-Diaz^{ID}, Brianne L. Weber^{ID}, M. Diane Clark^{*ID}

Department of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education, Lamar University, Beaumont, USA

Email: *mclark22@lamar.edu

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Abstract

Signing Exact English (SEE) has been one of the most widely used and debated manually coded English systems in Deaf education for over 50 years, yet little research has explored the perspectives of adults who grew up using it. This study explored the lived experiences of adults who grew up using SEE, uncovering themes focusing on family communication, educational experiences, language development, and later acquisition of American Sign Language (ASL). Thirty-two deaf and hard of hearing adults who grew up using SEE completed an online survey containing demographic questions and open-ended narrative prompts. Responses were analyzed thematically. Findings suggest that, for most participants in this study, SEE served as a path to English literacy and family connection, as well as a transition point to ASL.

Keywords

Signing Exact English, Deaf, Literacy, Family Relationships

1. Introduction

Signing Exact English (SEE) is one of several manually coded English systems developed to provide a visual representation of spoken English. Emerging during a period of significant change in Deaf education in the late 1960s and early 1970s, SEE was designed to represent English vocabulary, grammar, and morphology through signs while maintaining English word order (Gustason, 1990; Luetke-Stahlman & Milburn, 1996). Designed to provide deaf and hard of hearing children with visual access to English, SEE was widely implemented in educational programs and early intervention services, particularly those emphasizing English language and literacy development (Gustason, 1990; Rendel et al., 2018). The development of SEE built upon earlier manually coded English systems and reflected ongoing efforts to improve the visual representation of Eng-

lish for deaf and hard of hearing students. As educational philosophies and approaches evolved, SEE became one of the most widely recognized manually coded English systems used in educational settings (Gustason, 1990; Luetke-Stahlman & Milburn, 1996).

Over the following decades, SEE remained one of the most widely recognized manually coded English systems in the United States and became one of the most debated communication approaches in Deaf education. Supporters have argued that SEE provides deaf children with visual access to English grammar and morphology, facilitating English language and literacy development (Nielsen et al., 2016; Power et al., 2008; Rendel et al., 2018). However, this perspective has remained controversial. Critics have questioned both the effectiveness of manually coded English systems and the consistency with which they are implemented, arguing that natural sign languages, such as American Sign Language (ASL), provide a more appropriate linguistic foundation for language acquisition, cognitive development, and Deaf identity (Scott & Henner, 2021). Some researchers have also noted that teachers and interpreters do not consistently produce SEE with complete accuracy, raising questions about the language input children actually receive in educational settings (Hyde & Power, 1991; Luetke-Stahlman, 1991).

Although the educational debate surrounding SEE has continued for decades, relatively little research has examined the perspectives of adults who grew up using SEE. Much of the existing literature focuses on literacy outcomes, language acquisition, instructional practices, or theoretical arguments for and against manually coded English systems. Comparatively little attention has been given to the lived experiences of adults who grew up using SEE, including their family communication, educational experiences, language development, and later engagement with ASL and the Deaf community.

1.1. History and Development of SEE

The development of Signing Exact English occurred within the broader evolution of manually coded English systems in Deaf education. One of the earliest manually coded English systems was developed by deaf educator David Anthony with input from deaf students and adults. Originally known as Seeing Essential English (SEE I) and referred to in later literature as the Morphemic Sign System (MSS), Anthony's system was designed to provide a visual representation of English morphology through signs. Differences in philosophy regarding how English vocabulary and morphology should be represented eventually led Gerilee Gustason, Donna Pftzting, Esther Zawolkow, and colleagues to develop Signing Exact English II (SEE II), a revised system that became the most widely adopted manually coded English system in educational settings (Gustason, 1990; Luetke-Stahlman & Milburn, 1996). For consistency with contemporary use and the terminology used by participants in this study, the term SEE will be used throughout the remainder of this paper to refer to Signing Exact English (SEE II).

The adoption of SEE coincided with the widespread implementation of Total Communication in Deaf education during the 1970s and 1980s. As schools increasingly sought communication approaches that combined spoken English with visual support, SEE was promoted as a system capable of providing visual access to English while supporting the development of reading and writing skills. Consequently, SEE was widely adopted in many public-school programs, early intervention services, and parent education initiatives across the United States (Gustason, 1990; Rendel et al., 2018). Despite its widespread adoption, relatively few studies have examined SEE. The limited studies that do exist have focused primarily on English language and literacy, with little attention given to the long-term experiences of individuals who grew up using SEE. The following section summarizes the research that has examined SEE and its relationship to educational outcomes.

1.2. Educational Rationale and Outcomes

One of the primary goals of SEE was to provide deaf children with visual access to English grammar and morphology to support English language and literacy development (Gustason, 1990; Luetke-Stahlman & Milburn, 1996). Unlike ASL, which developed naturally within the Deaf community, SEE was intentionally designed as an instructional system to visually represent spoken English rather than as a natural language for everyday communication. Consequently, the literature consistently describes SEE as an educational tool intended to support English instruction, particularly reading, writing, vocabulary, grammar, and morphology (Gustason, 1990; Nielsen et al., 2016).

Several studies have reported strengths in English reading, writing, vocabulary, and grammatical development among students educated using SEE (Luetke-Stahlman, 1988; Nielsen et al., 2016; Power et al., 2008). However, few empirical studies have examined SEE, and many were conducted within programs specifically designed to implement the system. As a result, questions remain regarding the generalizability of these findings. Schick and Moeller (1992) further examined which aspects of English appear to be learnable through SEE, finding that students demonstrated strengths in several areas of English syntax while continuing to experience greater difficulty with English morphology. Collectively, these studies suggest that SEE may support certain aspects of English language development. However, the limited number of empirical studies and differences in educational settings make it difficult to draw broad conclusions regarding its long-term educational impact.

1.3. Continuing Debate

Although SEE was developed to support English language and literacy instruction, disagreement has persisted regarding the role that manually coded English systems should play in Deaf education. There is a broad agreement that deaf children require early access to high-quality language input to support healthy language

development. However, the primary disagreement concerns the type of language input that best supports long-term linguistic, academic, and social outcomes. Proponents of SEE argue that providing a visual representation of English grammar and morphology supports English language and literacy development, particularly reading, writing, and grammatical awareness (Gustason, 1990; Nielsen et al., 2016; Power et al., 2008).

Critics of SEE argue that ASL, as a natural language, provides a more appropriate linguistic foundation for deaf children. This perspective has become increasingly influential in contemporary Deaf education, where early exposure to natural signed languages is widely recognized as essential for language acquisition and Deaf identity (Scott & Henner, 2021). Critics have also questioned whether manually coded English systems can consistently provide the rich linguistic input necessary for optimal language development. Concerns regarding inconsistent implementation by educators and interpreters have further contributed to the ongoing debate surrounding the role of SEE in Deaf education (Hyde & Power, 1991; Luetteke-Stahlman, 1991).

1.4. Gap in Literature

Existing studies have focused primarily on literacy, language development, and instructional practices, while the lived experiences of former SEE users remain largely unexplored. The present study addresses this gap by examining how adults who grew up using SEE describe their family communication, educational experiences, language development, and later engagement with ASL and the Deaf community. Understanding these lived experiences provides an opportunity to examine the long-term experiences of individuals who grew up using SEE beyond theoretical and educational debates.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

After the survey closed, 32 of the 45 participants who had started it completed it. Of these participants, 28 reported being deaf, and four reported that they were hard of hearing.

Participant characteristics are summarized in **Table 1**. Most participants identified as Deaf (87.5%), learned SEE before age seven (93.7%), attended mainstream schools (77.4%), and currently identified ASL or both ASL and English as their primary language (81.2%).

Table 1. Participant characteristics.

Characteristic	n (%)
Hearing Status (n = 32)	
Deaf	28 (87.5)
Hard of Hearing	4 (12.5)

Continued

Age First Learned SEE (n = 32)	
0 - 3 years	21 (65.6)
4 - 6 years	9 (28.1)
7 - 10 years	1 (3.1)
11+ years	1 (3.1)
Age Began Learning ASL (n = 32)	
4 - 6 years	2 (6.3)
7 - 10 years	2 (6.3)
Middle school	4 (12.5)
High school	10 (31.3)
College	11 (34.4)
Other/Adult	3 (9.4)
Educational Setting (n = 31)	
Mainstream	24 (77.4)
Combination	6 (19.4)
Deaf school	1 (3.2)
Primary Language Used in Education (n= 32)	
SEE	20 (62.5)
ASL	4 (12.5)
Spoken English	4 (12.5)
Other	4 (12.5)
Current Primary Language (n = 32)	
Both ASL & English equally	17 (53.1)
ASL	9 (28.1)
English	6 (18.8)

2.2. Materials

A survey was developed that asked demographic questions regarding hearing status, educational placements, and past and current language usage (13 questions). Two additional open-ended questions were also included. The last simply asked if the participants would like to share any other information, but the main one was the following question:

Imagine a Deaf child growing up in a family and school environment where Signing Exact English (SEE) is used as the primary form of communication. From an early age, the child is exposed to SEE at home and in educational settings. Over time, the child becomes familiar with using SEE for communication and learning. The child's family can communicate with them, and they have teachers who sign to them using SEE in school. We (Amy and Bree) also grew up in families where SEE was used as well as in the classroom. We are interested in learning about your

family's choice of SEE and how you, as a young SEE user, felt about it. There is little recent research on this topic, but the use of SEE is still common; therefore, we are interested in how and why this communication choice occurred. Please share with us your interactions at home with SEE. Did all your family sign to you at home? How did SEE support or not support your family interactions? Why and how did your family learn SEE? If you asked your mother or primary caregiver why they learned SEE, what do you think they would tell you? Please share your school experiences with SEE in the classroom. How did SEE facilitate or not your academic learning in the classroom? Did you have other Deaf or hard of hearing friends that also used SEE?

The goal here was to elicit a narrative of why families had selected to use SEE as well as how the participants felt about this language choice and educational experience.

2.3. Procedure

The research was approved by the university's IRB. The survey was posted on social media, shared through the SEE Center at Education Service Center (ESC) Region 13 in Austin, Texas, and personal contacts were also used. The Qualtrics Survey included the informed consent, and the participants had to reply "yes" to continue. Then there were two screening questions asking if the participant was at least 18 years of age and if they grew up using SEE. If they replied "yes" to both questions, then they were allowed to continue to the rest of the survey.

2.4. Data Analysis

Responses to the two open-ended questions were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis. The first author conducted the initial coding by reviewing participant responses to identify recurring ideas and patterns. Preliminary codes were then developed and refined through iterative review of the responses. The second author independently reviewed all participant responses, the coding structure, and the resulting themes, confirming that the codes accurately reflected the participant narratives. The third author reviewed the final thematic framework, provided methodological guidance throughout the analytic process, and confirmed the themes accurately represented the participant narratives.

2.5. Positionality

The first and second authors are Deaf, sighted women who grew up using SEE in their homes and educational settings before later transitioning to ASL. Both are fluent ASL users and are doctoral students specializing in Deaf studies and Deaf education. These lived experiences informed the development of the study. The third author is a hearing, sighted woman with a degree in developmental psychology. She is fluent in ASL and has SEE training. She has worked, researched, and published in the field for 40 years.

3. Results

Overall data results showed that the screening questions were successful, with 88% reporting themselves as deaf, and the others were hard of hearing. All participants had learned SEE as their first sign system and then reported transitioning to ASL. Most (94%) learned SEE before the age of seven (66% between birth and three years of age). The type of schooling that most of these SEE users reported was a mainstream classroom (77%), and 63% reported that SEE was the primary language used during their K-12 schooling. The transition to ASL happened for most during high school or college.

The last two questions were open-ended; the first of these (question 12) included the scenario from the procedure, and the last one (question 13) asked them to share any other ideas they wanted us to know. When analyzing these two questions, 20 initial coding categories were identified. These categories were subsequently organized into broader themes presented below. First, we describe the ones from question 12, and then the others noted in question 13.

Responses to Question 12 were initially coded into 11 categories, which were organized into the broader themes as following: *families using SEE*, *parent training*, *successful family communication*, *communication barriers*, *family decisions*, *SEE in school*, *educational benefits of SEE*, *educational challenges with SEE*, and *SEE with peers*. Each theme is expanded below with the main ideas reported for each.

3.1. Families Using SEE

The participants describe parents, siblings, or other family members using SEE as a primary means of communication at home. Many participants reported that SEE was not only for school (54%) but that they used it with many of their family members, fostering a connection to their family.

3.2. Parent Training

Parents were reported as learning SEE through several mechanisms. Some learned in classes while others learned through Early Intervention with Deaf Mentors. Others reported that their schools had classes for parents, either formally or informally. For 38% of the participants, this issue was important enough to include in their narrative.

3.3. Successful Family Communication

The narratives from some participants included that SEE improved their family's ability to communicate with them (50%). They felt that it was responsible for their family relationships and increased their inclusion within the home so that they were not as left out. One participant explained, "Our family emphasized dinners at the table to ensure that good communication was had with the entire family and we all felt included."

3.4. Communication Barriers

Even though many felt that SEE had helped with family communications, 21% still reported limited communication at home. These parents tended to sign inconsistently, so dinner table syndrome frequently occurred among these participants, a form of communication exclusion in which deaf individuals are unable to fully participate in family conversations primarily due to the use of spoken language. These participants reported relying on lipreading or gestures for any communication with their parents. This subgroup had limited access to communication.

3.5. Family Decision

Several factors were reported that led their families to choose SEE. Some professionals had recommended SEE, leading to that decision. Others reported that their families wanted to be sure that English developed for their child and therefore selected SEE because it was English on the hands. Some reported that their parents wanted to be sure that their child had communication access at home. A few reported that their family had observed other successful SEE users and therefore believed that it would be effective. These reasons were reported by 46% of the participants. Two additional participants (8%) reported specific professionals who had encouraged SEE, including teachers, audiologists, early interventionists, or medical doctors.

3.6. School Used SEE

The main reason most participants reported growing up with SEE was that their school used it (79%). They noted that both the teachers and the interpreters used SEE in the classroom.

3.7. Educational Benefits

Educational reasons were the most frequently reported reason for using SEE, with 83% of the participants noting this as the rationale for this communication choice. They did not specifically refer to English literacy but felt it supported classroom learning and academic participation. They credited SEE for their educational access. They reported that it improved their participation in class and helped them understand instruction. As one participant stated, “SEE facilitated my learning because I was able to learn English at the same time.”

3.8. English Literacy

In addition to the success in school, 83% also explicitly stated that it improved their English language arts skills. These skills included reading and writing as well as vocabulary. They also attributed their grammar skills to the use of SEE, including sentence structure, English word order, and parts of speech. Finally, they also reported it helped them with written English. One participant wrote, “I feel strongly that because I grew up using SEE that I am able to read, write, and speak English as well as I do.” In the open-ended last question, many participants listed specific lit-

eracy benefits from using SEE. These included reading and writing (68%) and grammar (39%).

3.9. Educational Challenges

A few participants did not have positive experiences with SEE. They reported difficulties related to classroom experiences, limited access, and inconsistent signing (13%). A participant reported that they begged their parents to go to a school for the deaf because they felt they never really fit in.

3.10. SEE and Peers

Many participants reported having peers who also used SEE (67%). Some of these friends were in the same class, while others who were in more mainstream classes within a school with a deaf program; these peers were school peers. Many of these participants reported either a SEE Club or another type of peer group that was established at school.

The remaining results were unrelated to the participants' answers to the narrative and were included in the open-ended last question. Responses were initially coded into nine categories, which were organized into four broader themes. Each theme is expanded below.

3.11. ASL Usage

As the participants grew up, they moved towards greater usage of ASL (61%). Most learned ASL later in life, some starting in high school, others in college, and some even later. Some explicitly stated that they currently used more ASL and had fully switched. A few noted that ASL was more natural (18%), easier to use, and more expressive. A participant stated that nobody used SEE outside of their school and the college interpreters she used had to use ASL signs in English order for them to be able to understand the signs.

3.12. Value Both Languages

Some stated that both ASL and SEE had their purposes and were used at different times and in different places (64%). These participants reported that SEE helped with English while ASL supported communication and Deaf community involvement. About the same percentage (68%) reported still using SEE, Pidgin Sign English (PSE), or both again. As one participant explained "SEE helps me with writing, while ASL helps me understand the concept."

3.13. Parent Involvement

In the open-ended response area, 14% emphasized that it had helped with parental involvement. They highlighted the importance of family commitments and family support for their own language development.

3.14. Identity and Community

In regarding identity, there were both positive and negative comments included

by 25% of the participants. Some reported that they were neither hearing enough or deaf enough and that they felt rejected by the deaf community and shunned by the hearing community. Others had connected to the deaf community and developed a cultural identity and felt a sense of belonging. One participant shared, “I feel like I’m in between hearing and Deaf world. I wish I had more connections to the Deaf community.”

4. Discussion

SEE remains a “hot button for many people” (Knoors & Marschark, 2012; as cited in Rendel et al., 2018: p. 24). One can find articles like Scott and Henner (2021) that propose natural languages as the best and only way to achieve high literacy rates for deaf students. In contrast, there are only a few recent articles that provide evidence of academic success for SEE, including Rendel et al. (2018), Krause & Hague (2020), and Nielsen et al. (2016).

As noted in these articles (Krause & Hague, 2020; Nielsen et al., 2016; Rendel et al., 2018), the SEE communication system is over 50 years old and still highly used in some places, including Texas where the S.E.E. Center (The S.E.E. Center at ESC Region 13) is located and at the Northwest School for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing in Washington (<https://www.northwestschool.com>). Other systems like the Rochester Method, which used fingerspelling, have come and gone; but SEE is still readily available with ongoing professional development. Therefore, it is important to understand the benefits and limitations as seen by individuals who grew up in SEE contexts. Their lived experience provide an important perspective in understanding this ongoing controversy and are reflected in these scenarios that they presented to us.

Interestingly, these findings reinforce the goals that led to the early development of SEE (see Gustason, 1990; Luetke-Stahlman & Milburn, 1996), including increasing English literacy, reading, writing, and grammar. From the narratives, most participants described positive outcomes related to the original goals of SEE, which is effective English literacy. Another finding was the importance of family members using SEE. A tragedy is that many deaf children have little to no communication with their parents, and this foundational attachment is needed for resilience (Terry & Rance, 2023). Most of the narratives reported included good to full inclusion within their families.

In contrast, a few narratives were negative, with the individual betwixt and between the hearing and the deaf worlds (Smolen & Paul, 2023). Some, even with SEE at school, had families who did not sign and with whom the deaf individual did not have a relationship (Oliva, 2004). These narratives also highlighted rejection by the deaf community for not being deaf enough (Rodriguez, 2020).

Interestingly, many participants described SEE as part of their transition to ASL. Wolsey et al. (2017) noted that those who grew up with Listening and Spoken Language as the method of communication also transitioned from spoken language to ASL. These results are like those of Wolsey et al., in that participants in

both cases frequently valued both languages and were proud that they could transition back and forth between them. In both cases, family communication was the trigger for returning to the earlier system, while identity and connection to the Deaf community were the reasons for using ASL. Participants' narratives reflected appreciation for SEE in supporting their English literacy and for ASL in shaping their identity (Glickman, 2013).

5. Limitations and Future Research

This study sheds new light on why SEE has survived for a half century, but every study has limitations. The sample method used in this study focused on communities that are strong SEE communities. Participants were recruited through the S.E.E. Center, social media, and personal contacts, which may have resulted in a sample that maintained stronger connections to SEE than the broader population of former SEE users. Therefore, it is possible that there are more narratives closer to the negative ones in different communities than the more positive ones reported here. One theme that did not appear was how easy or difficult the transition was from SEE to a deaf centric identity using ASL. Two participants shared difficulties learning ASL, stating that they struggled to learn ASL but kept reverting to SEE, stating that they were "old school" and struggling to make new friends. Personal experience suggests that hazing may be difficult to endure when trying to learn ASL from the Deaf community.

More research is planned to continue to investigate strong SEE schools, using a case study method. It is hoped that this type of research can refocus the "hot topic" to one that is more accepting of those who select SEE rather than ASL. A surprise for this team was the statement from the S.E.E. Center's director that "ASL can survive without SEE, but SEE cannot survive without ASL" (personal comment, Delgado, Oct 25, 2025). While taking a summer workshop on SEE, one of the authors was impressed by the instructor's willingness to help students transition from SEE to ASL as they were preparing to leave a school that used SEE and enter a bilingual high school.

More research is needed into the narratives of SEE users' lives to continue to investigate common concerns about SEE (Rendel et al., 2018), including that SEE users will not be able to converse with members of the Deaf community, as these findings clearly do not show that for most individuals in this study. It will become important to understand why this issue remains a "hot button" and how the violation of bilingual separation of languages impacts the educational experiences of deaf SEE users. Simultaneous communication of two languages, frequently referred to as "sim com", is only possible when you have a spoken and a sign language used together (Emmorey et al., 2016). What are the neurological implications of this type of usage?

6. Conclusion

Surprise was clearly the immediate response of this team to our journey in this

research. As strong ASL users and researchers in bilingualism, these findings were unexpected. Here, SEE provided a path to English literacy and family communication for most of our participants. They then transitioned to ASL users but did not detest or even hate their early experiences with SEE. We leave you with a thought: is it possible that hearing people feel more comfortable with sequential grammar that they are used to, rather than spatial grammar with which they are not familiar?

Author Contributions

Design—M. Diane Clark, Literature Review—Amy Diaz, Bree Weber; Data Collection—Amy Diaz; Data Analysis—Amy Diaz; Method—M. Diane Clark, Bree Weber; Discussion—M. Diane Clark, Amy Diaz.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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