# Case Study of Peer Tutoring and Performance of Students in First and Second Year Courses

Sheri K. Barksdale
*University of Cincinnati UC Blue Ash*

*Students of American Sign Language, as well as other courses at the college level, often have limited time to practice presented topics during face to face meeting times. This is often of greatest concern for beginning level students. The instructor must tackle the need to provide structured, meaningful practice time for students balanced with the time needed for lecture presentation. Students have indicated, through student perceptions of learning surveys, that some desire more time for drill and repetition. The author suggests one option for students to review course topics in a structured setting.*

Students of regional campuses often take American Sign Language (ASL) as part of their course of study. According to student interviews conducted by this researcher, students also take ASL because it is something they have always had an interest in, but have never taken the opportunity to pursue. The University of Cincinnati Blue Ash College (UCBA) Institutional Research Department data from the academic year 2013-14 (Byron Walton, personal communication, October 15, 2014) indicated approximately 4% of students take a foreign language, with the mean age of students being 24 years. Students contact ASL instructors prior to every term asking to be added to closed Beginning American Sign Language (ASL) courses because they are always full well before registration closes.

While ASL is a popular course for students, it requires almost daily practice, beyond what is possible to provide during scheduled class time. The need for students to spend planned time interacting with course content outside of class meetings is an unwelcome expectation for them. There is also the frustrating reality for many foreign language instructors that students do not practice the foreign language they have signed up to learn, or worse yet, practice incorrectly.

In this paper I discuss one option of structured practice for beginning students to use the target language outside of the classroom. The purpose of this research project was to discover options that can be made

available on campus at a location and time that can be accessible and more convenient than opportunities in the community. Perhaps this paper will serve as an impetus for colleagues in the field of foreign language teaching, and especially teachers of ASL, to consider meaningful avenues for increased student use of the foreign language in an on campus setting.

**Background**

Interaction with a variety of native users of a given language is the best method of acquiring a second language. The more opportunities that students have to use the language in a meaningful way, the better. In the case of ASL, one option is to take part in events intended for Deaf people. Initially these experiences seemed to be the perfect introduction to the Deaf community and ASL. As the popularity of ASL in high schools and colleges increased the ASL students began to outnumber native users of the language at some events. It seemed to be an unfair expectation for teachers and professors to place the burden of responsibility of communicating with students on members of the community who are native users of the desired language. It became clear that schools teaching ASL had to take responsibility for the newest learners of ASL's practice time.

Two major obstacles to such meaningful interaction are infrequent class meetings and the limited availability of communication partners in the classroom. Additionally, foreign language homework may not be written homework, but listening or speaking homework. In the case of American Sign Language (ASL) assignments, the student may have the task to watch a video recording or to read English sentences and practice signing them in ASL. It is not unusual for students to complete their homework immediately prior to class. As a result of this type of practice, when new material is presented, some students do not have a strong foundation upon which to build.

It is clear that the typical student will not necessarily practice as much as is necessary in order to acquire a foreign language. This paper will discuss a project in which beginning ASL students attended peer tutoring sessions presented by intermediate ASL students.

**Literature Review**

There are attractive aspects of peer teaching according to Rodriquez-Sabeter (2005). A beginning student who is tutored by another student is allowed the opportunity to communicate in the foreign language,

with students who are not very far removed from the novice student in knowledge, age and status. Another facet to be considered is the atmosphere of student led sessions. Hammond, Bithell, Jones, and Bidgood (2010) studied same-year peer learning sessions. Students working in these cooperative learning groups also helped each other understand teacher expectations in a non-threatening environment.

Sobral (2002) examined cross-year tutoring of medical students. Students report they welcome the opportunity to tutor other medical students. Additionally, higher achieving medical students tend to extend the tutoring experience. The older the learner is, the lower the level of achievement in learning a language (Birdsong, 2006). Students attending regional campuses are often older than students attending main campuses. Finding a variety of suitable communication partners with whom to converse is often a struggle. The Guide Sessions allowed all of the beginning students, in theory, to be able to use sign language with all of the intermediate students. Each potential partner has skills, personality traits and background that could have hypothetically complemented the learning styles of a partner.

An obviously important aspect to learning a foreign language is the daily practice that is required for success. Long (1981) reasoned that conversational interaction between speakers as well as language input enhance comprehension. With this in mind, foreign language students needed interactive practice outside of the weekly 3 hours of class time in order to develop communicative skills. Students also needed to use the language beyond the hours leading up to a test. It has been known to happen that a teacher will enter the classroom on test day to find all of the students furiously paging through their text book. When students are simply looking at a word and whispering the English word while somewhat forming the ASL signs, they are not learning ASL. One may wonder if these students really believed that their method of studying and preparation actually rivals conversational practice. As frustrating as it is for teachers, students continued with the path of least interaction. That is, many students looked at the textbook alone, or look at a video without really using the language they wish to acquire, as part of their practice. Most of the students in this study understood that these types of attempts rate very low on a scale of effectiveness, but they reasoned that it is better than doing nothing.

There was also the benefit that was afforded to the tutor. According to Rodriquez-Sabeter (2005), peer tutors have reported benefit from leading

tutoring sessions by reviewing the basics of the language they are teaching. This was an unexpected and welcome outcome of the tutoring sessions at UCBA.

**Guide Session Project Description**

This project was conducted at the University of Cincinnati Blue Ash College during the 2012-2013 and 2013-2014 academic years. All of the students taking ASL were required to take part in the structured practice time, outside of the classroom with peer communication partners. The beginning students who were tutored in the Guide Sessions described in this paper were undergraduate students enrolled in ASL 1001 and 1002 courses. The Guide Session leaders were undergraduate intermediate students in ASL 2001 and 2002. The average number of undergraduate students per class for the 2013-2014 academic year were as follows: ASL 1001 had an average of 19 students per class, ASL 1002 had an average of 16 students per class, ASL 2001 had an average of 17 students per class, and ASL 2002 had an average of 13 students per class.

Intermediate ASL students, guide session leaders (GS leaders), worked alone or in pairs to tutor beginning ASL students. The tutoring sessions were 25-30 minutes long. The GS leaders were required to lead 2 sessions. Each session was equal to 50% of a test grade. If they led one session the earned 50%, if the led 2 sessions they earned 100%. The grades were not based on how successful they were in leading the session, but were an all or nothing score.

The beginning level students were to attend and actively participate in a minimum of 3 Guide Sessions. Students were encouraged to attend more than the minimally required sessions, especially if they felt that presented concepts were difficult for them to master, or if their fine motor coordination was lacking. The beginning students' grade for attending all 3 sessions was equal to one test grade. Similar to the grade given for the intermediate students, the credit was given based solely on attendance. There was no graded assignment associated with the sessions. No extra credit points were given for being present at more than the required number of sessions. The number of beginning level students in attendance at a Guide Session ranged from 0-12, with a mode of 7 students.

The Guide Sessions were set up four times per term, using the following procedure. The Instructor proposed a list of Guide Session times, based on room availability. ASL class times were also considered, so that

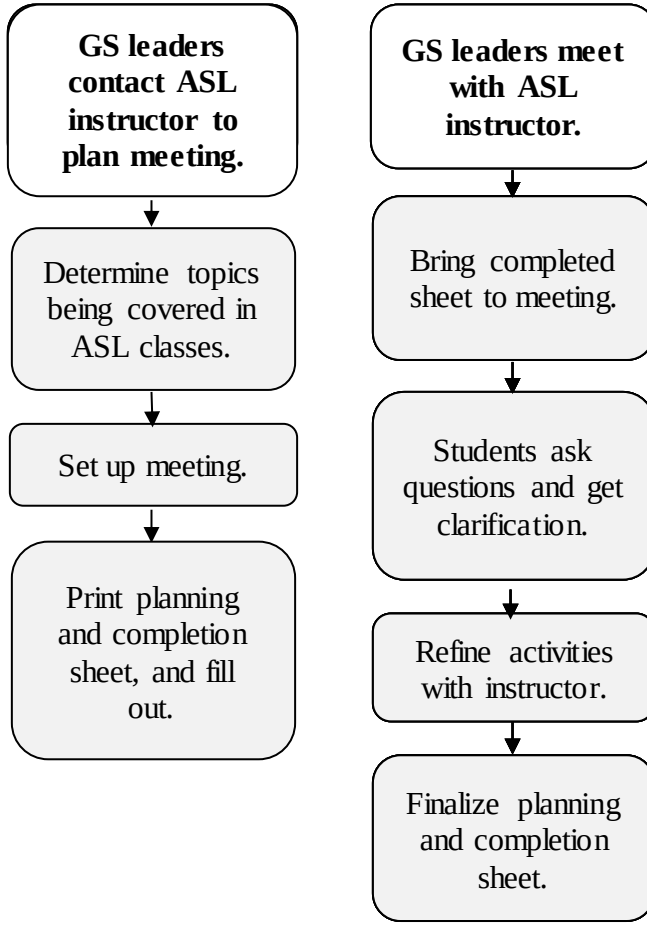
sessions could take place 30 minutes prior to class, and starting immediately after class was scheduled to end, though this did not always work out. The list of available times was sent in an email to the intermediate students. They were instructed to reply with their top three preferences. The schedule was then determined, by assigning intermediate students to lead specific Guide Sessions.

An online scheduling tool was used by the instructor in order for beginning students to sign up to attend Guide Sessions. The beginning students chose and attended the sessions that fit their schedule. The scheduling tool was also used as a backup to check attendance, in the case where a student claimed to have attended, but the leader did not put their name on the list. This was not a perfect solution, but did help to jar the memory of the leader as to attendees. Subsequent to participation in the session, the beginning students completed an online survey regarding the effectiveness of the session and leaders.

There were two major activities that GS (Guide Session) Leaders completed after signing up to lead sessions. First, they need to gather information and prepare for their meeting with the instructor, then meet with the instructor to finalize their plan prior to leading their session (See Figure 1).

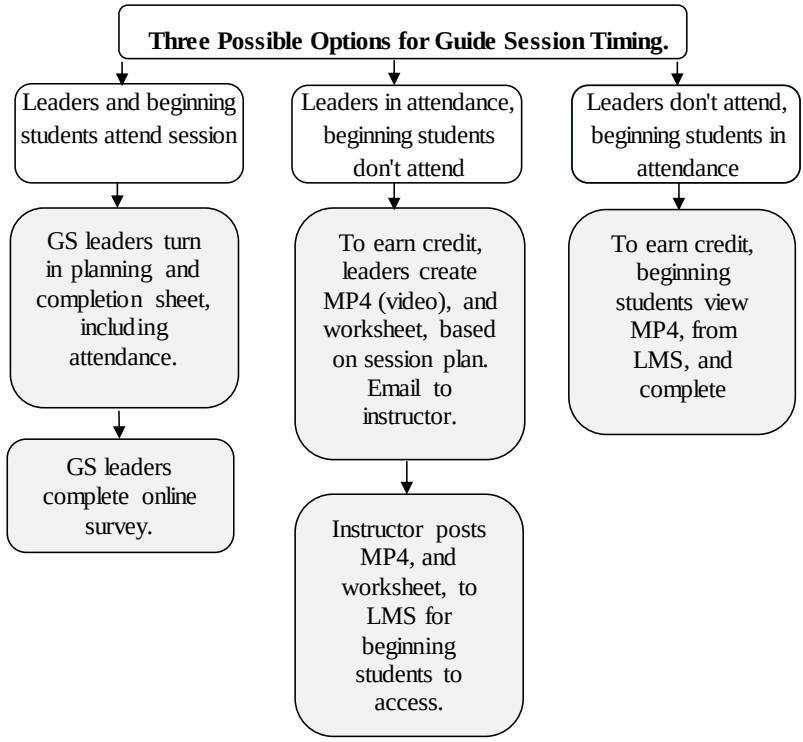
All GS leaders were required to meet with the ASL instructor. They were offered the option to meet either face to face or via internet video chat. The GS leaders were instructed to conduct the session in the target language, with two exceptions: The leader could write on a large whiteboard in front of the room during the session, when it was clear that the students were getting frustrated. The leader was also allowed to answer questions in English during the last 5 minutes of the session. It is clear that not all students conducted all sessions only in the target language. However, this tended to be the exception and not the rule.

*Figure 1.* Process for Guide Session Preparation




Guide Session leaders were to have a clear specific plan prior to leading the session. In order to plan for and prepare for the Guide Session, the students had a worksheet, called the Planning and Completion Sheet (see Appendix 4), provided to them. The Guide Session was to focus on topics that were being presented in class around the time of the session (See Figure 2). The guide session format was as follows: Attendance, Introductions, Activity 1, Activity 2, and wrap up. During the wrap up, the beginning students could ask questions in English.

*Figure 2.* Guide Session Timing Options.




There were 36 sessions offered in the 2012-2013 academic year. Of those sessions, there were three occasions when GS leaders did not show up to the session, two instances were due to family emergencies, and one associated with personal illness. Even though the beginning students signed up online to attend the session, there was 1 associated family emergency, the other 2 coincided with winter weather conditions (See Figure 3).

*Figure 3*

| **Number of Guide Sessions Scheduled** | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Fall 2012 | Spring 2013 | Fall 2013 | Spring 2014 |
| Beginning students attending sessions | 91 | 60 | 98 | 64 |
| GS leaders | 32 | 26 | 34 | 26 |
| Sessions | 20 | 16 | 18 | 14 |
| Average number of beginning students signed up to attend per session | 9 | 8 | 10 | 7 |
| Average number of beginning students in attendance per session | 7 | 7 | 9.5 | 6 |
| Number of sessions without leader | 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Number of sessions without beginning students | 1 | 0 | 2 | 0 |

During the 2013-2014 academic year there were 32 sessions offered. Two of the sessions did not have a leader, both cases due to illness. Two sessions had no beginning students, both of these instances were likely weather related. In that same year, there were 4 beginning students who were unable to schedule attendance at Guide Sessions. The students informed the instructor during the last week of scheduled sessions that they were unable to attend any sessions. Given the number of sessions that were offered, and the fact that the contact was made at the end of the term, it seems as if some effort could have been made earlier in the term to attend sessions. In an effort to accommodate the students, the instructor allowed them to complete one of the digital multimedia (MP4) videos and assignment sheets in lieu of one session (See Figure 3).

During the fall of the 2012-2013 academic year, one session was led by the instructor; in the other instance the instructor provided beginning students an online assignment to complete at home, in order to earn credit for attending. It became clear that there would be instances where there

would be Guide Sessions (GS) either without leaders or without beginning students. In the spring of 2012-2013, the GS leaders were required to have a backup plan. They were to prepare a 10-12 minute MP4 video, based on the activities they had planned. The video had to have an associated word document that required responses. For example, the GS leader might have signed a short story and then had questions on paper, to which the students would respond. The videos and response forms were sent to the instructor for approval and correction and then were stored in the foreign language lab. This back up plan then provided an activity for beginning students in the case when a GS leader did not show up to lead a session.

**Procedures**

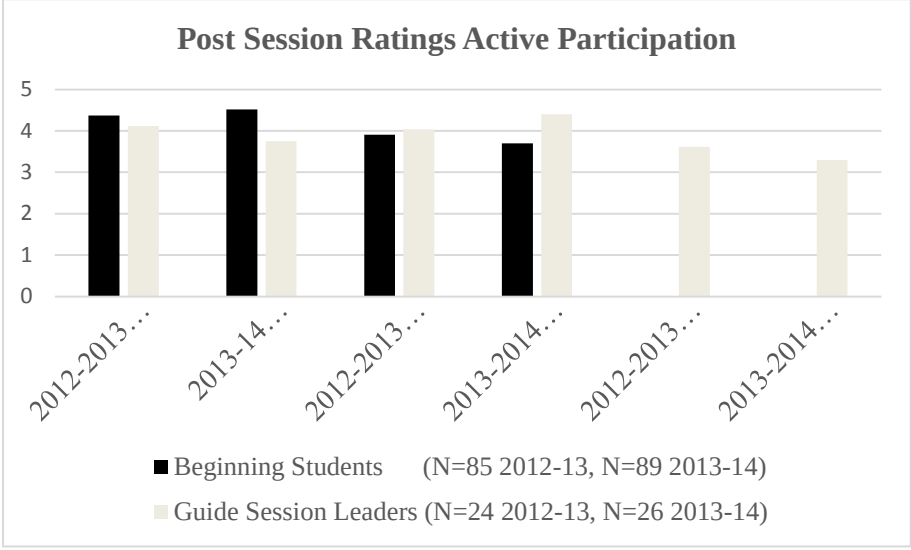
The ASL instructor, met with each intermediate class to clearly explain their responsibilities, description of expectations and to demonstrate where to find the documents related to leading sessions. The ASL instructor was given access to the intermediate classes Learning Management System (LMS) in order to place the required materials, survey link and descriptions on the webpage for each class. Access to the LMS also afforded the possibility to send group emails to students.

The ASL instructor also met with each of the beginning ASL classes. The meetings were to clearly explain how the Guide Sessions would be of benefit to them, as well as a description of expectations. Documents, an internet link and survey link were also added to their LMS sites. The link provided to the beginning students allowed the students to see all of the Guide Session dates and times, and to add their name to the list of attendees (there was a limit of 14 students per session). After beginning students took part in a GS, they were to access an internet link to a survey. They were to anonymously complete several Likert scale questions regarding the effectiveness of the sessions, and leaders, and to offer comments.

**Survey and Results**

Beginning and Intermediate ASL students were asked to complete a survey to evaluate the perceived value of the Guide Sessions (see appendix 1). The results have been compiled for each of the academic years, 2012-2013 and 2013-2014. For both years, beginning students reported that they actively participated in the session, learned something new and felt as if the Guide Session provided beneficial practice opportunities (See Figure 4).

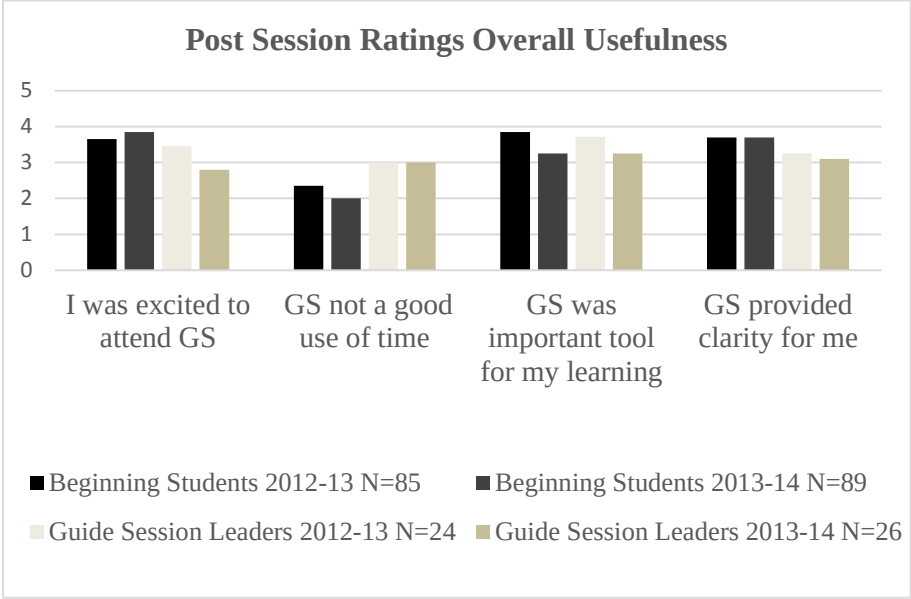
*Figure 4*




It's interesting to note that the beginning students reported more active participation in the 2nd year of the Guide Sessions, however the Guide Session leaders, who were beginning students the previous year, did not feel as if the beginners participated as well as they had participated. The better participation may be due to the fact that the leaders had an understanding of how the sessions would work, because of their own experience. Perhaps they were more comfortable leading the sessions simply because they had attended a number of sessions already.

Overall, beginning and intermediate students felt that the Guide Sessions were useful. The beginning students, in both years, reported that they were excited to attend the sessions. The intermediate students were less excited than the beginning students. Both groups also indicated that they were an important tool in their learning and practice of ASL, and that they provided clarity (See Figure 5).

*Figure 5*




For both years, the intermediate students indicated that they felt the sessions helped to provide clarity to the beginning level students. Also, it is interesting to note that the Guide Session leaders felt that the Sessions were a better use of their time than the beginning students. Several of the beginning ASL students reported on the surveys that the intermediate students talked throughout the sessions.

The average final grades for beginning students did improve slightly after implementation of the Guide Session, though they would not be considered statistically signficant differences (See Figure 6). The fact that the students had more opportunity to use the langauge can not be discounted. No data was collected for the grades of the intermediate leaders.

**Conclusions**

Executing this plan for Guide Sessions has gotten easier. Arranging session times to meet the schedule of students was at times difficult. Many of the students at our college work full time, so trying to meet obligations outside of class time can be difficult for them. The sessions will continue to evolve, and additional facets will be added in the future.

*Figure 6*

| | Average Final Grade | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Fall 2011 | Spring 2012 | Fall 2012 | Spring 2013 | Fall 2013 | Spring 2013 |
| | (prior to Guide Sessions) | | | | | |
| 1001 courses | 76% | | 78% | | 80% | |
| | 80% | | 80% | | 80% | |
| | 81% | 81% | 82% | 83% | 82% | 84% |
| 1002 courses | | 77% | | 78% | | 80% |
| | | 79% | | 80% | | 83% |

This study was limited by the fact that it was conducted by one instructor. It was necessary for one person to meet with all of the leaders. There are 2 other teachers of ASL, but given the nature of their job descriptions (part time adjunct) and other responsibilities, it was not reasonable to expect them to do additional work. This writer welcomes any feedback and encourages others to consider a peer tutoring program for their courses.

The positive outcome in this study was that students were actively engaged in using the language and grammar rather than looking at a book or video to practice individual words/signs, and reading about the grammar. All of the students involved in the sessions had the advantage of interacting with a variety of communication partners who were at or near the same language level. Students were present in class a total of 3 hours per week. By attending the Guide Sessions, ASL students had the opportunity to deepen and integrate their understanding of the language through prolonged structured rehearsal, which is not always available during class time.

Clearly, any technique that encourages students to use the language is valuable. By allowing the beginning students the opportunities to use the second language with students who have already taken the course provides learners with informal practice and increases their level of comfort in using ASL.

## Appendix A

**Evaluation of Guide Session for Beginning ASL Students**

Indicate your level of agreement for each of the following statements.

| | | Strongly Disagree | | | | Strongly Agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | I considered my participation in the Guide session as very active. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 2. | I felt that learning with other beginning ASL students detracted from my learning. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 3. | I felt that the Leader was well prepared for the Guide Session. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 4. | I felt as if I learned something new during the Guide Session. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 5. | I felt I got beneficial practice time during the Guide Session. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 6. | I felt excited about using ASL during the Guide Session. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 7. | I felt the Guide Session provided clarity of topics presented in ASL class. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 8. | I felt as if the Guide Session was not a good use of my time. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 9. | I thought that it was important to sign with people with whom I don't normally sign. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 10. | I felt more confidence in my ASL skills as a result of participation in the Guide Session. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 11. | I considered that most other students were very actively engaged in the Guide Session. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 12. | Guide Sessions provide an important learning tool for beginning ASL students. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

What is one way you would suggest to improve the Guide Sessions?

**Appendix B**

**Evaluation of Guide Session for Intermediate ASL Students**

Indicate your level of agreement for each of the following statements.

| | | Strongly Disagree | | | | Strongly Agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | I considered the Guide session to be an effective learning experience for beginning students. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 2. | I did not feel as if the Guide Session was a good use of my time. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 3. | I felt that the students were very actively involved in the Guide Session. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 4. | I felt I was well prepared to lead the Guide Session. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 5. | I felt as if I increased my understanding of ASL as a result of leading the Guide Session. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 6. | I did not feel excited about using ASL during the Guide Session. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 7. | Guide Sessions provide an important learning tool for beginning ASL students. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

How did you prepare to lead the Guide Session?

**Appendix C**

**Guide Session requirements**

- Each intermediate student should lead 2 sessions.
    - Sign up using doodle poll
        - 2001 and 2002 students may work with partner.
            - If you know who you want as a partner, each student should sign up in an individual blank, (partner can sign up for same time on another participant line).
            - If you don't have a partner in mind, but want to work with someone, student may sign up and write *want partner* after name, and anyone else can sign up as partner on another participant line.
            - Students should make contact with each other prior to leading session.
        - limit of 2 leaders
    - After 2001 and 2002 students sign up to lead session, 1001 and 1002 students will be informed of session times.
        - If no beginning students sign up to attend the session 24 hours prior to scheduled time, then the session is cancelled.
        - If no beginning students show up to session with 7 minutes of start time, each Guide Session leader will create a 10-12 minute video in FL lab, based on the lesson plan provided. (information under Guide Session video)
- 25-30 minute lesson plan will be developed by GS leader.
    - Intermediate students should schedule a meeting with instructor prior to leading session. Contact instructor the 7 days before your session. You may meet:
        - Face to face during office hours
        - Face to face appointment
        - Via Skype appointment
- On the day of your session, Guide Leader should complete evaluation, in the Guide Session tab on your Blackboard site.

**Appendix D**

**Planning and Completion Sheet**

**Leader(s)**
Name _____ Name _____

**Dates** Session (circle one) ___1___2___ date set up on doodle poll.
- Session date _____day of week _____ time
- Contact instructor by above date
- Meeting date (1 week prior to session date) with instructor _____
- Meeting complete _____ (signature)

**Lesson Plan:** Unit in book _____

**Introduction**

_____
_____

**Activity one**

**Goal for lesson**

_____
Outline_____
_____

**Activity Two**

**Goal for lesson**

_____
Outline_____
_____
_____
_____

**Back-up plan** if no beginning students show up and video needs to be made

_____
_____

**Attendance list**

| | |
|---|---|
| _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ |

**Complete evaluation**

On the day of your session, post information in the Guide Session tab on your Blackboard site.

**References**

Birdsong, D. (2006). Age and second language acquisition and processing: A selective overview." *Language Learning 56*, 9-49.

Hammond, J. A., Bithell, C. P., Jones, L., & Bidgood, P. (2010). A first year experience of student-directed peer-assisted learning. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, *11*(3), 201-212.

Long, M. H. (1981). Input, interaction, and second-language acquisition. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences, 379*(1), 259-278.

Rodríguez-Sabater, S. (2005). Utilizing undergraduate peer teaching assistants in a speaking program in Spanish as a foreign language. *Foreign Language Annals*, *38*(4), 533-538.
Language interactions outside of the classroom.

Sobral, D. T. (2002). Cross-year tutoring experience in a medical school: conditions and outcomes for student tutors. *Medical Education*, *36*(11), 1064-1070.

**Personal Biography**

Sheri Barksdale teaches all levels of ASL, and hybrid content courses for the Professional Certificate in Deaf Studies at the University of Cincinnati Blue Ash College. She holds a Master's Degree Hearing Impaired Special Education. Her current research interests are supporting students in hybrid and online learning.