Class Reflection

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MLAS 201: Beginning ASL I

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Having spent two years studying at the Rochester Institute of Technology, I was fascinated by the quality of the services provided by the institution for those whose primary method of communication was ASL. I have participated in several classes with one or two deaf or hard of hearing students yet, no matter the occasion, interpreting services are readily available. This experience was a bit of a culture shock as effort to provide such services to those who need it is rare in the present day. This along with the high population of Deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals at RIT/NTID are what inspired me to declare my immersion in ASL and Deaf Cultural studies.

Before enrolling in this course, I thought of ASL as just another language, only used out of necessity for those who cannot or have trouble expressing or being receptive to spoken language. Kemp (1998) mentions the perception that Deaf people are disabled is seen as offensive by members of the Deaf community. Another common misconception I and many other ASL learners shared was that ASL has a similar grammatical structure to English and just a conversion of English words directly to signs or to finger spelling. Baker and Cokely (1980a) define one of the components of language to be a “system of symbols grammatical signals that members of a community share. ASL combines handshapes, facial expressions, palm orientation, movement, and hand location to form its core set of grammatical signals and symbols making gesture more a prominent feature of the language than with spoken languages like English. By nature of being a minority in a hearing world, I understood that members of the Deaf community would develop their own internal values and traditions to form a sense of social cohesion. I believed that, through cultural assimilation, that there would be many similarities between the present day Deaf community and the rest of the country, yet there were plenty of values that I did not expect to hear about let alone know that they were still upheld today. Most notably were the openness to share lots of what the hearing world would deem as “private information” with others as well as identifying people through minute physical traits or experiences that many would just overlook or disregard.

On the first day of class, it was mentioned that after the first week, the rest of the class would not be taught using spoken English and there would be no interpreters to help us. Instead we would communicate with our Deaf instructor primarily in ASL and through text. At first, I felt uneasy. If I were to forget what the instructor signed or were to fall behind in class, it may be difficult to keep up with lessons and continue learning at a steady pace. Our instructor provided reassurance through an introductory lecture where we were taught basic signs that we could use to help us signal to repeat something or if we did not understand. In hindsight, I feel that this was a very effective way to teach any language; learners are pressured to study and practice to develop the enough proficiency necessary to converse with others in the language. In particular, learning enough ASL to formulate simple sentences is simple enough although reaching advanced proficiency takes much longer (Kemp, 1998). Despite this, I can confidently say that I now know enough ASL to communicate on a basic level.

There are many similarities between ASL and English despite the difference in communication mode. Baker and Cokely (1980b) discuss the origins of ASL and how the language is largely related to French Sign Language evidenced by the vast number of cognates between the two. Cognates are words into different languages that are “historically related” and thus often have some similarities (Baker & Cokely, 1980b). In ASL and FSL, signs like LAUGH or RIRE in FSL share sign language parameters such as movement and location like words in English have similar phonemes or come from the same root like the English word “house” and the German word “Haus”. Baker and Cokely (1980a) also mention how languages have “co-occurrence rules” which determine which language symbols cannot appear in sequence like certain phonemes in English. Likewise, in ASL signs with the “F” handshape that contact the body must only contact where the thumb and the index finger meet (Baker & Cokely, 1980a).

A misconception about Deaf culture that I held before taking this course was regarding the development of American Sign Language. I was unfamiliar with the history of this language prior to taking the course and so I naively believed that the relatively small population of deaf individuals in America compared to hearing individuals meant that the development of ASL must have started in some small city and spread from there over time. Baker and Cokely (1980b) suggest a more likely explanation that immigrants from Europe or the British Isles brought their sign languages over from their countries and developed them further within the places they lived creating “home signs” understood by signers in the region. I had not heard of the stories of places such as Martha's Vineyard that had such a high Deaf population that its own regional sign language was developed. It was not until the creation of Deaf institutions like the American School for the Deaf that a nationwide sign language would begin to be standardized (Baker & Cokely, 1980b).

Higher education exists to spread knowledge to individuals who in turn will improve and enrich the lives of themselves and more importantly share their gained knowledge and experiences to enrich society as a whole both practically and culturally. Therefore, I believe that as a college student learning ASL for the first time, I believe that I have an obligation to share my newfound appreciation for ASL and Deaf culture with others who may not have ever thoughtfully considered the Deaf experience. Doing so may encourage others to immerse themselves in Deaf studies of their own which would bring more attention to issues the Deaf community faces. Societal change does not happen rapidly and small steps such as the spreading of knowledge and advocacy for Deaf issues are the small steps college students like me can take to provoke such change.

This semester was an incredible introduction to ASL and the Deaf world. Comparing the other language classes I have taken, none have quite given me the same level of intrigue for their history than this. I feel that this is largely due to the fascinating information I learned regarding Deaf culture. Many hearing people believe that hearing loss is a net negative to one’s own life experience, however, learning about all of the ways Deaf people adapt to live their own interesting lives, I found that is certainly not the case. Life as a Deaf person even seems equally and often more fulfilling than the common experiences of a hearing person in America due to how much focus is put on building community through their values and norms.

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