

Does Music Have a Place in ASL Pedagogy?

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INTRODUCTION

The interaction of ASL and music gain some ground lately. There is an increased presence of ASL interpreters in concerts/musical shows and deaf artists in sports games signing the national anthem. Also, there is a growing number of deaf artists creating musical videos and doing music translations. This change has hit the academia that some ASL instructors are incorporating music into their ASL curriculum to make it more appealing for students. I am here to examine whether now is the right time to offer music a place in the ASL curriculum.

Let's discuss briefly the purpose of teaching ASL. Like other languages, we teach ASL because it is one of the languages people speak in America on a daily basis. In order to gain access to a population of ASL-speaking individuals, students need to learn and speak ASL. The main goal for teaching ASL is to help students build ASL and cultural competence. In order to achieve this goal, instructors primarily focus on linguistic aspects (i.e., ASL vocabulary, grammar, semantics, register, and dialogue strategies) and cultural aspects (i.e., history, literature, culture, lived experiences, and communities). With these competencies, students can participate (through speaking and listening) in informal and formal conversations on a wide range of topics from abstract and concrete perspectives. Students can also tell stories, explain complex matters, express opinions on various topics, and articulate arguments. These outcomes reflect the purpose of teaching ASL.

Now, does music have a place? In order to answer this question, it is necessary to examine whether music is culturally acceptable and whether music helps or harms ASL pedagogy.

CULTURAL ACCEPTANCE

Some deaf people do enjoy music and some deaf artists do create music videos or translate songs. However, that does not reflect the acceptance of the majority of deaf people towards music. Music is currently not one of the core cultural values within in the deaf community, as it is with other cultures. Music does not feature prominently in Deaf spaces such as community events, Deaf-centric schools, films, and plays. Incorporating music into the ASL curriculum, which employs a deaf cultural framework, sends a wrong message about the community's cultural perspective on music.

ASL PEDAGOGY

In the domain of ASL pedagogy, there is a discussion among ASL teachers that the use of music would help engage students better in learning ASL. Their rationale is that music is popular and students listen to it everyday. Students engage more when they recognize something familiar especially in an unfamiliar territory and have opportunities to use music for language exercises

such as translations. This may seem pedagogically sensible, but I do not agree for several reasons - proven practices, level of difficulty, and lack of music in well-known ASL curricula.

First, one of the effective practices for teaching a language is to promote full immersion in a target language and culture. Most ASL classes employ this practice because it is a proven practice. Once ASL students enter the classroom, they automatically go into a zone where a combination of American Sign Language, visual/gestural modality, and deaf cultural norms are the only and primary functions. To experience true immersion, students take an audacious step into a completely unknown territory that provides language and culture richness. Facing unfamiliarity and uncertainty, they realize what they need to do and create a determination that they commit their time and energy on improving their ASL skills and deaf cultural knowledge. Music is counterproductive to their immersive experience because it contains aural/oral modality and lyrics with references to hearing culture. It weakens the fullness of immersion which means students lose a total focus on a target language (ASL), a target modality (visual/gestural), and/or a target culture (Deaf culture).

Second, from my and other colleagues' teaching experiences, we have rarely had a concern about a lack of participation. We had a lot of success with their students without any exposure to music. In spite of the lack of music in our classrooms, our former students are now interpreters and professionals in deaf communities. Apparently, this proven practice shows that there is no need for music to be introduced in order to increase student participation.

Third, there's a discussion among ASL teachers that music could be a useful tool for students to learn ASL/English translation. Students pick a song that they know well and then translate it to ASL. From what I have observed, this task is extremely difficult. A song is not simply about lyrics, but also rhymes, the way it sounds, and semantics. Also, what makes the task more challenging is the modality - aural/oral. Students do not simply translate a song from English to ASL, but also from aural/oral to visual/gestural. The change of modality will affect students' ability to create something that provides the same sensory stimulation as hearing people get. ASL signs alone do not sufficiently create sensory stimulation and students must consider other aspects such as non-manual markers (i.e., facial expression, mouth morphemes, and body language) and rhymes (repetition/pace). To achieve this, students must strive for equivalency in meaning and sensory experience. Such a task like this may be appropriate for advanced ASL students, but it requires more than just ASL proficiency of students. Teachers need to have a formal training in using music as a pedagogical tool. Unfortunately, many teachers have yet had such a training and there are a very few professional development workshops available for deaf instructors to learn about such a topic. Without any formal training, teachers are unable to help students translate songs effectively. It is not advisable for deaf instructors to incorporate music as a tool without a formal training otherwise they suffer a poor quality of teaching that will, in turn, affect student learning.

Fourth, most Deaf-authored ASL curricula do not mention or recommend a lesson, an activity or assignment that involves music. One may argue that these curriculums may be 'out of sync' with today's generation because they are designed five years ago or so. Actually, there is a new curriculum that is recently released and it's True+Way ASL. It does not mention music at all.

One must ask why. One conclusion I can come up is that these curriculums are Deaf-centric that they are mostly authored by Deaf professionals.

CONCLUSION

A lack of cultural acceptance and pedagogical challenges lead to conclude that music does not have a place in our ASL pedagogy. Teaching ASL primarily focuses on increasing ASL proficiency and cultural competency. Incorporating music as a tool can be problematic from cultural and pedagogical perspectives. Music is not widely celebrated or recognized in Deaf spaces such as community events, Deaf-centric schools, films, and plays. This suggests that music is not considered one of the core cultural values. In ASL pedagogy, music is more seen as an hindrance than a benefit in facilitating students' ASL and cultural competency developments. Using music for ASL/English translation is a difficult task for both students and teachers. For students, they need a high-level proficiency and an ability to achieve equivalency in meaning and sensory experience. For teachers, they can not use music as a tool effectively until they receive a training which is not widely available. Music is not a must-have tool as there are effective and proven practices many ASL teachers have employed to engage and help students increase their ASL proficiency and cultural knowledge. Again, music does not have a place or, at least, now is not the right time.

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