

Allyson Zuleger

Minnesota State University

HONR 375

13 March 2024

### Reflection #1 Final Draft- Intercultural Engagement Development-ASL Levels I and II

I have taken two levels of American Sign Language (ASL) through Minnesota State University Mankato and have been able to learn the language and culture of the deaf. In the introduction course, ASL I, I was taught in person by a non-deaf professor. This course pointed my focus to understanding deaf culture and foundational knowledge of the language itself. Throughout the course, I learned new vocabulary by observing the signs from the professor and by practicing independently and with peers in class. I also referred to accounts from members of the deaf population while reflecting on the culture and with my peers. The second ASL course I took was taught online by a deaf professor; we focused on developing more conversational ASL. This means we spent time connecting vocabulary to form longer strings of signing. We learned how to form narratives and be descriptive.

Going into the ASL courses, I knew some ASL signs but did not know anything related to deaf culture. I learned some ASL as a child, but it was minimal; only knowledge of the alphabet and some basic signs. Most of that was forgotten, but I think that background helped me acquire the language components and individual signs faster than my peers. Concerning deaf culture, I knew nothing. I did not know the relationship between ASL and the deaf people who use it or the broader concept of how language impacts culture. I expected to build on my

knowledge of the language through these courses, which I did. These courses also laid a foundation for my knowledge of deaf culture and allowed me to grow in intercultural engagement which I did not expect at the start of my journey. Through the courses, my knowledge of ASL grew and I was introduced to an appreciation for deaf culture.

Through these courses, I learned that in deaf culture I would be identified as a hearing person- someone who is not deaf and uses spoken language. In my cultural story as a hearing person, I view spoken language to communicate but am less aware of how my language interacts with my culture or my language's importance at times. I also learned how society is set up with the expectation that people are hearing. Hearing culture places so much value on verbal communication that they cannot imagine the absence of it. I was able to better understand that hearing culture and the major emphasis on communicating with only verbal language is not the only way. Learning about how ASL plays into deaf culture gave me a new and deepened appreciation for unique language and its effect on the culture of the groups who use that language. In deaf culture, the language of ASL is more than a mode of communication. ASL allows for a different level of expression that you do not get with spoken language. People communicating in ASL are much blunter, for example. In ASL you would communicate your exact feelings, whereas, in a spoken language people may downplay emotions/situations or 'beat around the bush'. It is uncomfortable at first to be so blunt, especially when describing people. However, in their culture communication is very straightforward and it allows for better understanding. As an example, a hearing person may describe someone who has a temper as a person who "gets a little worked up", whereas in the deaf language it is likely that they would communicate the person is "angry fast". The expression in their language is one example of what

gives ASL so much value in their culture. Understanding this importance helps you value the language of ASL and gives it deserved appreciation as a learner.

One instance of ethnocentrism that I had to overcome through this experience was trying to understand why members of the deaf community may not want to take steps to be able to participate in spoken language through cochlear implants or other technology. As a hearing person, I had a hard time understanding why they would not take advantage of the technology. I had thought that spoken language was the best way to communicate. As I developed my appreciation for their culture, however, the significance of communicating through ASL and identifying as a deaf person was clearer. If an individual decides to get a cochlear implant, they will rely less on ASL or may not learn the language at all. Individuals may no longer be as descriptive, or expressive in their communication when using spoken language. Cochlear implants also lead to a decrease in the use of ASL which is harmful for the continuation of the language and culture. Moreover, if a person chooses to get cochlear implants, do they identify as a deaf person or hearing person? If people stop identifying as deaf people, does it dissipate deaf culture entirely? Overall, I learned how cochlear implants can be problematic for deaf culture and ASL as a whole. I have grown to understand that cochlear implants can empower deaf people and create very positive experiences, but they should be used mindfully to preserve deaf culture and ASL use.

One important step to overcome this ethnocentrism was to learn about deaf culture from accurate and reputable sources. Learning the culture unbiasedly allows me to see the culture for what it is worth on its own without making any personal judgments. I think it is important as a learner to be vulnerable when learning about a culture; you may need to ask questions to fill in parts you don't understand, even on a very basic level. I was able to learn about deaf culture

because it was taught to me through many modes. I heard accounts from members of the deaf population, families of the deaf, and professionals in the world. For me, overcoming this ethnocentrism meant learning unbiasedly.

Now, I can continue to build on my knowledge, spread what I know, and apply it in the future. I have developed a foundation for my knowledge of ASL and deaf culture, but I am eager to continue. I plan on taking more ASL courses if I can fit them into my schedule while also independently digesting material from members of the deaf community and those connected. I can also participate in conversations to speak about the importance of deaf culture and how ASL plays a role.

In my future career in special education and current work as a paraprofessional, this knowledge of the language and personal growth is also very important. I use ASL with nonverbal students and will use it with future students as well. My knowledge of the language components allows me to communicate and teach them in their way of communicating. My personal growth surrounding culture is important too. I will have students with disabilities who have a different cultural story than my own. I can take what I have learned and know that every part of culture holds more significance than I might give it at first thought. I am more mindful, curious, and appreciative of culture after this experience which will help me serve students in my future career.