

## **DEAF CULTURE AND LANGUAGE: CONCERNS AND CONSIDERATIONS FOR MAINSTREAM TEACHERS.**

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Culture and language are woven together. They are linked in ways that are difficult to comprehend because both are so ingrained into our consciousness that we take them for granted. They are amorphous concepts, always changing, with an ever-moving center. We often speak of the necessity of teaching culture in language classrooms. Is it also necessary to learn the language in order to understand a culture? The answer is probably yes, without a doubt. A most glaring example of this is reading and learning about deaf culture without learning any means of communicating with the deaf. A bold, arrogant and grave error on my part (and many others), one I hope to correct soon. Language and culture in deaf communities are so intertwined that it is nearly impossible to speak of one without the other. The form of communication that a person uses, manualism, oralism or both, is judged and classifies that person. A heated debate over which is better continues today. Communicating is at the heart of the deaf culture. How and where children are to be educated is also a topic of great controversy. Should they be sent to residential schools or mainstreamed into public schools or is there a middle ground? Traditionally, residential schools have been the source of socializing children into deaf culture. If mainstreaming is starting to take place, then are the teachers prepared to work with deaf and hearing-impaired children? Can we educate teachers and give them tools to incorporate deaf children into the mainstream classroom? Can we inform teachers of politeness systems and language patterns common in the deaf community? Can we teach them culture? I believe we can. So, armed with ignorance, arrogance, misinformation and a total lack of the skills needed to communicate with the deaf, I set out to learn about deaf culture. It was and continues to be a complicated but fascinating journey.

The language debate has historically polarized the deaf community. This continues today. Within the community there are subgroups and people living on the fringes. The deaf community is as diverse as any, with varying cultural ideas. One unifying and divisive aspect of deaf culture is language. Most deaf in America view themselves as part of the deaf community at large. They all share a frustration with the hearing world and seek an alternative method of communication.

Question: What's the greatest problem facing deaf people today?

Answer: Hearing people.

-old deaf joke

There has been an on going debate over oralism and manualism for decades. Oralists argue that deaf people should learn to speak and read lips in order to function in the hearing world. Hearing people will never learn American Sign Language; therefore the deaf must learn to communicate in spoken English. (There is also an underlying suspicion of any hearing person who learns ASL. They are not quite trusted, unless they are hearing children of deaf parents. These seemingly contradictory beliefs are even further evidence of the turmoil over language within the deaf community.)

Manualists argue that sign language should be taught and learned in schools as the child's first language. What kind of sign language should be used? There is much debate within the manualist camp. Some argue that ASL is best. A solid first language will facilitate other language skills such as reading and writing in English. Others think that signed English should be used. (This is sign language with English syntax.) These people believe that signing in English syntax will enable the child to read and write better. (Literacy is a problem in the deaf community, just as it is in the hearing community.) If a child learns ASL, then essentially they must learn to read and write in English as a second language. There are also those who somewhere in the middle. No matter where one falls on the spectrum, there is often a stigma to signing in English. Deaf people will often remark that the signer "thinks like a hearing person." There are no clear answers to the issue, but at least it is being discussed.

One thing most seem to agree on is their frustration at the arrogance of the hearing world towards ASL. For the most part, the hearing world now accepts ASL as a language. It has been analyzed and studied by linguists who agree, ASL has all the features of any other language. ASL has been given the stamp of approval. By whom? The hearing world. Many in the deaf community wonder why they are still looking to the hearing world for validation. These people are frustrated because many deaf people claim this is a hearing world and the deaf must adjust to the hearing world. Oralists would fall into this group of people who think the deaf must learn to communicate with the hearing. Leaders in the deaf community insist that the world belongs to them too. Until the people are ready to claim their place and rights in society at large, they will be treated with fear and viewed as disabled.

So where does this debate get played out? In the school system. Where does deaf culture get passed on? In the school system. Until recently, most deaf children who have attended school have been placed in residential schools. These schools have helped to perpetuate deaf culture, but many say it has failed to prepare students to live outside the walls of the institution. The students may excel in school but leave with no long-term goals. They are not ready to live in the mainstream society. The schools are typically very strict and rule-governed. Schedules are tightly adhered to and there is little flexibility. The students live in dorms and seldom visit their families. For the most part, their world exists within the walls of the school. When they are allowed to visit a near by town, they are monitored, watched and must go in pairs or groups. Privacy is almost non-existent.

This environment makes for a high-context culture. The students all know each other and all the teachers and dorm advisors. There is a strong sense of group and a desire to protect each other. This carries over into life after school. The deaf tend to form strong and close ties at these schools. These friendships continue well after school has finished and life has taken them in different directions. When deaf people meet they often state their name and what school they attended. This gives the other person an immediate context in which to place this new acquaintance. So, even between the different schools there is a lot of shared knowledge and experiences. Since the deaf, obviously cannot hear or are hard-of-hearing, non-verbal expression is of the utmost value. Aside from the signing with hands, the face and body posture are essential aspects of communication in sign language. The deaf can read the subtle variations in facial expressions and body language.

The rigid atmosphere of residential schools can contribute to a deaf person's difficulty outside the walls of school. Many say the rigid schooling leave students unable to deal with classrooms in the mainstream. Students are not accustomed to flexibility. Students are angered and upset when the teacher deviates from the syllabus. (A classmate of mine did this in class

several times. He was upset and stopped listening because we briefly talked about a topic not on the syllabus. It upset him the entire class period even though we got back on the day's topic.)

Some claim that residential schools are not the best choice for deaf children. There are now alternatives in education. With new laws, children are entitled to the least restrictive learning environment. The government pays for assistance required by students who wish to attend public schools or the mainstream schools. There is a middle ground like private schools where the children go home on weekends. However, more parents are choosing the public schools, especially those who cannot afford private schools. Are the public schools prepared for this? Are teachers trained for this? Often times not. What can we do? A lot. We can educate and train teachers and give them the resources they need.

We can inform teachers of how interactions and conversations between deaf people may be different from hearing people. We can teach them some aspects of deaf culture and language. Conversations between deaf people often begin informally. They get to the point quickly and end conversations formally and slowly. This is in contrast to many American conversations where they begin more slowly so that we can figure whom this person is and how to interact with them. Americans also begin more formally (in certain situations) and end more quickly and informally. The conversational pattern of deaf people reflects their desire to facilitate conversation quickly and get to know someone. The long good-byes reflect a desire to promote unity and ensure a lasting bond. (Hall, 1989, p.89). They want to establish relationships. Whereas hearing people generally think, "the conversation is over, I have to go." If they wish to continue the conversation it can be done easily over the telephone, something more difficult for the deaf.

Another issue that may be of some concern for teachers in public schools is the issue of touching. Touching in public schools is usually discouraged especially between teacher and student. However, touching is an important part of communicating for the deaf. It is used to get a person's attention or to signal that you would like a turn in speaking. The person wishing to speak stands close to the speaker or almost touches them. The speaker may acknowledge the other by taking their hand. (Hall, 1989, p.93-96). Touching in this manner is a huge involvement strategy in the hearing world. Also, men almost never touch other men in the American hearing world.

Touch is so important in the deaf world that it appears in interesting ways in the language. (Evans & Falk, 1986, p.120).

For example: ASL

I think touch you.

Late touch.

Think touch.

Think touch you.

English

I will keep you in mind.

(an act done yet)

(bringing to mind someone)

Keep in touch.

Keeping in contact with someone is important in both the hearing and deaf worlds. Yet, ASL uses the word touch in their language more frequently in order to express some sort of tie to another person.

An extremely rude behavior is turning your back or closing your eyes on a deaf person. Essentially you have stopped all communication by doing so. Speakers must look at each other in order to communicate. This can be very uncomfortable for hearing people. We seldom look directly at the person we are speaking to. We often look off to the side or look at other things. This is rude to deaf people. Looking directly at a person is not only necessary but may be easier for deaf people because they are accustomed to it. While hearing people should be made aware

of this, deaf people also need to be aware that hearing people are not trying to be rude. We look away because we are uncomfortable with looking directly at people and also because we are sometimes distracted by sounds around us.

Sharing information is also common among deaf people. Private conversations are difficult because their form of communication is visual. Anyone can join a conversation once it has begun. If deaf people wish to speak privately, they can sign in a small space or fingerspell behind a hand (similar to whispering). However, this is considered rude by many (just as whispering would be). When a deaf person gets a phone call, they often share that information with the others in the room. (Hall, 1989, p. 99). This is because information is precious so sharing information is common among the deaf. Access to information is limited and not as easily received, therefore secrecy is considered antisocial.

These are a few patterns in conversational style that should be easy to explain to teachers, but perhaps difficult to adjust to. Other suggestions that may help teachers with deaf or hard-of-hearing students are related to classroom management and availability of resources. Deaf people want access to information. Language barriers have limited the amount of information they receive. Hearing people receive an enormous amount to information through their ears. Schools can have TTY access for some phones on campus, if phones are available to students. Schools can also have captioned television. This will benefit all the students in the class. It will help literacy classes, ESL classes and general classes with reading.

Working with interpreters is an important element in the success of deaf or hard-of-hearing students in the mainstream classroom. Teachers must be informed that interpreters are not all the same and the student may not complain about an inferior interpreter. The student may feel terrible is better than nothing. (Part of this may stem from a general culture of "voicelessness" in the deaf community.) The teacher can try to find out how fast he/she can speak and have the interpreter keep up. The teacher can also repeat things that other students say, especially when more than one student speaks at a time. (This will probably benefit all the students.) The teacher needs to find a place in the classroom where the interpreter can sit so the student has a clear view of the interpreter and the teacher and any visual materials the teacher may use at the front of the class. Teach other students that they should look at the person they are talking to, not the interpreter.

Teachers should also consider the acoustics of the classroom. Extraneous noise is distracting for all students not only hard-of-hearing students and interpreters. Visuals are also beneficial for all students. If there are hard-of-hearing students, try to remember to face the students when speaking. If teachers write on the board and talk at the same time, it is more difficult for students to understand because they cannot see the teacher's lips. And the most important for any teacher in any classroom, know the needs of the students.

All of these are easier said than done. However, with education, training, practice and a willingness to change, teachers can make the classroom a more interesting and enriching environment for all students, not just deaf students.

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