

Dr. Vicars,

<http://www.lifeprint.com/asl101/pages-layout/signedsongs.htm>

I am a rural music teacher in Kentucky. I was hoping to do some basic signing with my older kids for the Winter Concert. Should I just take a Sign Dictionary and have the kids do the main words? Any suggestions would be appreciated.

Sincerely,
Lori S.

Lori,

If its possible you should scout around and find a few native Deaf ASL signers in your area who would be willing to help out.

But, you mention that you are a "rural" Kentucky teacher. That sort of points in the direction of your not having access to much of a Deaf population from which to draw.

So then, the approach you should take depends on your goal.

1. If your goal is to avoid controversy and please the Deaf Culture Police, then you should:

Avoid signing songs and focus instead on storytelling and "ASL poetry."

2. If you goal is to practice signing ASL then you should:

Analyze the song thoroughly. Determine it's message. Then interpret that message into ASL. Sign the ASL interpretation using the song as background music. Do not focus on matching your signs with the lyrics or the beat of the music. Instead you should consider the general tempo of the music and select an appropriate flow for your signing.

3. If your goal is to practice "contact signing" (formerly called "PSE"), you should:

Choose conceptually representational signs and put them in the order of the lyrics. You should avoid using filler words like "a, an, the, be, being, been, was, were, etc." Also sign the concept when it is obvious. For example, instead of "was" or "Once upon a time" -- you could sign "past."

4. If your goal is to practice singing English you should...

strongly consider finding something else to do with your time.

(Heh, just kidding.) Seriously though, for those of you working in Deaf Schools or Day Programs that use signed English--songs can be an excellent way to learn and practice vocabulary.

Just remember that regardless of the sign system you choose, you should use facial expression and incorporate visual/gestural principles where appropriate.

For example, use body shift, sight line, directionality, and any other method that lends itself to good signing. If you are signing a song that is talking about a little girl communicating with God, you should look up (a bit) while signing her words then look down (a bit) while signing God's words.

Remember also, you can't please everyone. If you sign songs in front of people you will eventually receive some form of criticism.

Let me share this thought from a speech given by President Theodore Roosevelt in Paris in 1910.

"It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better.

The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs and come short again and again, because there is no effort without great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high

achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat."

In a message dated 3/5/2003 5:05:13 AM Central Standard Time, Rob writes:

<<I enjoyed visiting your website; however I was startled by your response to a question about signing songs in which you responded with:

[<< 1. If your goal is to avoid controversy and please the Deaf Culture police, then you should: Avoid signing songs and focus instead on storytelling and "ASL poetry."

2. If you goal is to practice signing ASL then you should:

Analyze the song thoroughly. Determine it's message. Then interpret that message into ASL. Sign the ASL interpretation using the song as background music. Do not focus on matching your signs with the lyrics or the beat of the music. Instead you should consider the general tempo of the music and select an appropriate flow for your signing. >>]

I wholeheartedly disagree with your recommendation to consider the song as background music in interpreting a song.

As a hard of hearing person and graduate of Gallaudet University, I can tell you that music was very much widely accepted and appreciated at Gallaudet, which, as you no doubt know, is a "Deaf" university. If your actions turned off the students at Gallaudet then it would be safe to say that it was NOT culturally correct to engage in such actions. In the years that I was at Gallaudet, I invariably ended up gaining free admission to whatever event was being held in exchange for (what became quite popular) "services" in interpreting the music being played.

I interpreted songs practically "word for word" (contrary to your suggestion) and I had more than my share of feedback in adjusting my signing styles to various songs while still maintaining as close as I can with to the tempo and lyrics, yet I can honestly recall only two people outright dismissing my interpretation of music and stating it as not being a part of "Deaf Culture" during my years at Gallaudet. Perhaps these two eventually became the "Deaf Culture police" you refer to? Trust me, they are few and far in between yet can be quite "vocal." To pay heed to this minuscule minority does the greater population a disservice.

As my years of signing songs at Gallaudet prove, Deaf people very much want ACCURATE interpretations of the song. I remember all too well being chided on stage at the university president's annual welcome reception (by a campus faculty member no less!) for being "vague" in the meaning of Frankie Goes to Hollywood's "Relax" in which I had interpreted the lyrical line "when you want to come" as "WHEN YOU WANT C-O-M-E" instead of the accurate "WHEN YOU WANT (EJACULATION or ORGASM)." Talk about turning shades of red!

While you're not disputing that the Deaf enjoy and relate to music, I'd like to emphasize that a large portion of them DO enjoy music as the following anecdote will relate:

During Deaf Awareness Week one year at Gallaudet, MJ Bienvu, a noted scholar on ASL and bilingualism, gave a presentation and someone in the audience asked about the status of music in Deaf Culture. She promptly stated that music had NO place whatsoever in Deaf Culture. What happened next completely reinforced my habit of "song-signing" at parties. A student, wearing a Walkman with the headphones draped around his neck, went on the stage with MJ and asked only three questions: "How many of you have a stereo or radio in your room?" (At least a THIRD of the audience, Gallaudet students all, raised their hands) "How many of you like to dance to music?" (At least HALF of the audience raised their hands). Looking at MJ, he then asked "And you say that music has no place in Deaf Culture?!" and walked off the stage to the waving cheers of a good portion of the audience. MJ was obviously flummoxed and could only respond with "It is a matter of personal preference."

I do very much enjoy your website and hope to see your continued successes with it.

Rob Voreck>>

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Hello Rob,

<http://www.lifeprint.com/asl101/pages-layout/signedsongs.htm>

I sent you a separate email thanking you for your response and asking you for a source for the wonderful anecdote. You wrote: <<I interpreted songs practically "word for word" (contrary to your suggestion) >>

Actually that in line with one of my suggestions. I gave *four* suggestions. You state that you sign songs "practically word for word." Your method follows suggestion number *three* (conceptually representational signs in the order of the lyrics). This is one indicator that you are adopting a "contact signing" approach to song interpretation and performance.

What I love about your letter is that it is REAL WORLD. Meaning, in the real world, Deaf people shift between contact signing and "ASL" on an everyday basis without giving it a second thought. To us it is all just "our language."

Deaf *linguists, politicians, and ASL instructors*, however are in the process of trying to convince Hearing linguists, Language program directors, and state legislators that ASL has its own separate grammar, syntax, and lexicon (vocabulary). Such being the case you will see an *academic* dividing line placed between contact signing and ASL.

I recall leading a signing troupe at a performance for the honor society of the department of foreign languages at a college where I taught. We signed the songs that night as you do...which is to say, we did them using ASL (conceptually accurate) signs and followed the word order of the English lyrics.

Afterward one of my students who was privy to the conversations of the honor society informed me that the department chair was even *more* convinced that ASL didn't have a place in his department because he noticed that signing followed English word order during the song and as such "ASL" *obviously* didn't have a separate grammar from that of English.

Signing word for word mistakenly gave the impression that ASL is just English on the hands.

Let's define contact signing:

English word order, the use of prepositions, constructions with "that," English expressions, mouthing of English words as *well as ASL nonmanual signals, body and eye gaze shifting, and ASL use of space* are all part of: "**contact signing**" (Vali & Lucas, 2000).

Notice that contact signing does use ASL signs, nonmanual signals, body shifting, eye gaze, locatives...all of that stuff. The main influence in labeling it contact signing rather than "ASL" is that the syntax follows English.

Now...let me again state it is obvious that you have your thumb on the pulse of the Deaf community in regard to this issue. I applaud your promotion of music and song signing. I feel that signing songs can be an excellent method for hearing students to acquire vast amounts of new vocabulary and retain that vocabulary for an extended period of time. Later when students hang out with Deaf friends they will be able to recognize the song vocabulary and readily produce it as they go about developing their communication skills.

Bill

Bill:

After re-reading your suggestions, I do apologize. It appears that I latched onto just one of your suggestions and taken issue with it.

You bring up an interesting point about ASL itself. I DO believe ASL has its "own separate grammar, syntax, and lexicon" and yet I also DO believe that it is not a static and unchanging language.

I remember all too well a rather nasty exchange of emails that was forwarded to quite a few deaf people about the existence of ASL as a bona fide language. One person claimed that the majority of deaf people who claimed to be

ASL proponents were NOT using ASL but rather something more akin to "contact signing" (as you noted in how I handle songs). The person then pointed to a questionnaire created by some PhD at Gallaudet to determine one's language usage.

My wife is profoundly deaf, has deaf parents, all three siblings are deaf, went to deaf schools all her life, etc., etc....It'd be a no-brainer to say that she was an ASL-user. However, according to the questionnaire, which gave a series of two language phrases with the same idea/intent and the person would select the phrasing that most resembled their own style, she was NOT an ASL user but rather more like PSE. Naturally, she was quite offended at that.

Very much awed by her livid reaction to being told she doesn't use ASL, I reviewed the questionnaire and realized that the questions simply differentiated between "pure" ASL and sign language (which I still considered to be ASL) in a more "English-correct" grammar format.

It was then that I realized that herein lies the problem: People are discounting the effect of better education for the Deaf...They are discounting the effect of such an education upon the language they use. Granted, there is still a gap between deaf and hearing education but there is unquestionably an improvement in deaf education as a result of all the federal laws in special education that have been in existence for, what, only roughly 30 years?

The problem I have with the academics of language and with most of the "Deaf culture police" is that they are treating ASL as if it was Latin...a language long dead, static, and unchanging. Veer from the rules laid down for Latin and you're not using Latin anymore. However, the same cannot be said of ASL; any criticisms towards a Deaf person for "deviating" from the rules of ASL as they currently stand are, I feel, invalid for at least a small part because who can honestly discount the possibility that this "deviation" may one day be widely accepted in ASL?

ASL is a living language and like any other language, it incorporates new vocabulary, structure, format, and a slew of other influences and modifies itself accordingly. I believe that as native ASL users become skilled with written English, the more their signing will fall closer to a more "English-correct" grammar structure; it is inevitable that English would influence ASL.

The ASL purists might howl at that last comment but I stand by it. Change is inevitable and it's always the vocal minority who cling to the ways of the past.

There was a time when new wording such as "email" was very much frowned upon because it was probably perceived as a lazy way of saying "electronic mail." I doubt anyone would now dispute the fact that "email" is a legitimate word in itself...except for those quasi-purists who would say the correct version is "e-mail." :) This is just one simple example of English creating a new word. Even an academic purist can't deny that a living language can and does change.

Granted, the above example relates only to vocabulary but there are thousands of examples in how English itself has changed over the years, not just in vocabulary but in grammar as well. Why is it beyond the ability of people today to see that the same thing is happening to ASL itself?

Bernard Bragg, a well-known Deaf actor, mime, and writer, touches upon the same opinions in a book he wrote some years ago. I can't recall the title at the moment though.

Wow, I haven't done this kind of deep thinking about ASL in ages! Thanks for the incentive!

-Rob Voreck