

Improving my ASL Accent

Goal: To adjust ASL phonology toward more fluent pronunciation

Rationale:

For many of us, our formal (classroom) ASL education focused primarily on learning vocabulary, syntax, various uses of space, and some classifiers. Having limited time in the classroom setting, our professors had little time to refine our pronunciation of individual signs and non-manual markings (facial, head, and torso movements).

Additionally, when we are conversing in a social situation, most people will not correct our signs unless something is incomprehensible. This can make it difficult to improve/correct our production of signs. This activity focuses our attention on the pronunciation (phonology) of ASL by aligning our production with that produced by fluent signers. Over time we will develop our own personal idiolect as we integrate the styles of many different sign models, similar to the process we went through with our first language.

Prep for the Activity:

- Find a video of a Deaf person signing in what you assess to be fluent ASL. If you wish to work on a specific aspect of ASL, find a video that models that feature in a way you want to learn.
 - If you do not know where to find a video like this, attend a Deaf or interpreting event and ask people who their favorite Deaf Vloggers are, etc..
- Write down the order of phonological features you want to analyze and practice (here are a few samples — decide for yourself what you want to focus on, and in what order, and write it down).
 - Handshape, location, palm orientation, movement, joint of articulation...
 - Eyebrows and eyes (squint/wide/eye-gaze direction)
 - Cheeks and nose
 - Mouth movements
 - Head and torso movements

Practice Activity:

- Watch the video several times until you feel you understand it fully. If there are parts you do not understand, ask a fluent/Deaf friend.
- Videotape yourself signing what the person in the video signs.
 - You may do this from memory in its entirety, or in chunks, or you can “copy sign” — watch the video and sign at the same time.
- Play the video of yourself side by side with the original.
 - There are several software programs that can help with this. My favorite is ELAN, which is free for downloading at: <https://tla.mpi.nl/tools/tla-tools/elan/>.
- Based on the order you chose in “Prep for the Activity,” look at each sign that the original person signed, and the one you signed, and compare the feature you are analyzing.
 - ***This will take a week or two, working a little bit each day for an hour or two!***
- AFTER comparing your video and the original, practice adjusting your signing to mimic that of your model’s.
- After practicing, videotape yourself again.
- Compare your new video of yourself side by side with the original, model video.

Once you feel that you have successfully matched the model, then compare the next phonological feature (manual, non-manual, non-facial, etc...). Repeat the above steps until your video looks the same as the original: rhythmically, manually, and non-manually.

After activity (follow-up):

DO NOT SKIP THIS PART! Learning through action without reflection is fleeting.

- Write a journal entry/blog post/reflection paper/letter-to-a-friend-or-classmate about what you noticed, what you learned, and what you still want to work on.
- Use your reflections to inspire the next activity you will choose.
- Be sure to complete at least two activities a week, one way or another (one every day would truly indicate deep commitment).
(This is rich ground for your excuses to rear up. Don't let them win!! Find a way.)