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The Dialectic of Second-Language Learning: On Becoming an ASL-English Interpreter

Abstract

A small group of interpreters was interviewed with regard to their view of learning ASL and becoming bicultural. A model of identity was then postulated based on Hegel’s dialectic (Wheat 2012) of thesis (presuppositions, stereotypes, or theories about ASL and the Deaf community), antithesis (conflicting experiences), and synthesis (new understanding and acceptance). Also utilized were various identity constructs from the literature on bilingualism/biculturalism, which suggests that identity is ascribed or constructed in relation to others and constantly negotiated (Tropp et al. 1999). Evidence was found of a period of thesis or position, during which some interpreters had no presuppositions about Deaf people or ASL; some perhaps had a disability perspective. Next they went through a process of antithesis or opposition, during which they discovered the complexities of ASL and Deaf culture and values that conflict with their own. Here the participants described confronting the “hearing line” (Krentz 2007), society’s negative view of Deaf people; some of them may have developed a sense of bilingual fatigue (McCartney 2006; Schwenke 2011; Watson 1987). Finally, the participants arrived at a level of synthesis or composition, during which they had a more complex and nuanced understanding of their identity in relation to the Deaf community. At this level, they viewed Deaf people as a positive foil to the hearing world; for them, Deaf people modeled a collective and egalitarian approach to others and stimulated reflection on the meaning of diversity and inclusion.

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