

Deaf Culture Question of the Week - June 1 - 5, 2009

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This is the last Deaf Culture Question of the Week because it is the last week of school at WSD. Have a great summer break. Hope you have enjoyed the Deaf Culture Questions of the Week this year.

An ASL Question this week.

The role of facial expression in ASL is primarily to:

- a. Express emotions (happy, sad, skeptical etc.)
- b. Signal pauses or ends of sentences (like periods and commas)
- c. Serve grammatical purposes (sentence types, modifying the meaning of signs etc.)
- d. Control turn taking

Scroll down for the answer.

Answer: "c" Serve grammatical purposes - Facial expressions fall in a category of ASL grammar called "**non-manual signals**." These are facial and body-posture signals that occur simultaneously with signs and serve various grammatical functions. For example, signing YOU STUDENT YOU with head tilted forward and eyebrows raised makes the three signs a question "Are you a student?" The answer is either a Yes or a No. This non-manual signal is called Yes/No Question Expression. Using the same three signs, YOU STUDENT YOU, if the signer nods head slightly a simple statement of fact is being communicated "You are a student." Using the same three signs while shaking the head back and forth with eyebrow knitted together and a frowning facial expression changes the meaning to "You are not a student." The sign "NOT" is not required to be signed. Signing YOU STUDENT YOU without any of the above non-manual signals is not a sentence at all. Adding the non-manual signal is required to make the three signs a sentence. Non-manual signals are a required part of the grammar of ASL to signal the type of sentence being communicated.

Non-manual signals also function with individual signs to modify the meaning. For example, if a signer uses the sign TO-WRITE with lips closed and protruding, the meaning added is similar to "with ease, no sweat, normal." If the signer uses a clenched teeth expression with lips pulled back while signing TO-WRITE, the meaning is "with difficulty." If the signer signs TO-WRITE with his/her tongue slightly protruding downward on the lower lip while making the sign, the meaning expressed is "carelessly or without paying attention to." The non-manual signals here are only three very basic "facial expressions" that modify the meaning of verbs. There are many more. They are acting as adverbs. To interpret the meaning of these signed expressions you will need to read the **manual sign** "TO-WRITE" and the **non-manual signal** that is expressed simultaneously. For example, suppose a signer expressed the following: YESTERDAY SCHOOL TEST WRITE-clenched-teeth. The English equivalent of this ASL sentence would be something like "I had a difficult time with the test yesterday." or "The test yesterday was really hard." The exact translation would depend on many other factors such as the context in which the sentence was expressed. Substituting WRITE-with-tongue-protruding would mean "I put no effort into the test yesterday." Or, WRITE-with-lips-protruding would mean "That test was a breeze." These same non-manual signals added to other verbs carry the same meaning. This demonstrates that they are serving a regular grammatical purpose in ASL.

Practice these non-manual signals for yourself.

Look forward to the Deaf Culture Question of the Week starting back up the first week of September.