All languages and cultures have literatures through which they pass down stories and transmit the experience and values of a group of people. In the late 1960s, linguistic analysis of American Sign Language (ASL) documented that the language of Deaf Americans was bona fide. By the 1980s, cultural descriptions of the DEAF-WORLD began to appear in publications. In more recent times, the literature of ASL has been recognized and celebrated. Perhaps one of the more formal celebrations of ASL literature has been the 1991 and 1996 National American Sign Language Literature Conferences at Rochester, New York.

With the recognition of ASL literature, literary and linguistic analyses of the emerging canon have arisen as academic fields of study (e.g., see Bauman, 1996; Krentz, 1996; Neumann, 1995; Ormsby, 1995; Peters, 1995; Rose, 1992; Rutherford, 1993; Valli, 1994; Wilcox & Sweetser, 1996, among others). In addition, justification for the inclusion of ASL as a language for foreign language credit at secondary and postsecondary institutions has required recognition of ASL literature (Frishburg, 1988). But what does it mean to be literate in a signed language? What is ASL literature?

ASL Literacy

What does it mean to become literate in ASL? While, in truth, most members of the DEAF-WORLD become biliterate or multiliterate, literacy in ASL has often developed outside of the classroom in informal residential school settings, Deaf families, and other DEAF-WORLD contexts. Yet, increasing numbers of educators and researchers have begun to explore the use of ASL literature formally in school and in children’s theater programs (e.g., see Bryne, 1996; Smith, Seago, Steiner, & Cole, 1996; Supalla, Fraychineaud, Wix, & Singleton, 1996).

Although there is a growing awareness that literacy is not equivalent to reading and writing skills (Cummins, 1994; Kuntze & Bosso, 1994), it has become apparent that we need a clearer explanation of ASL literacy. Wilcox (1987) has taken an interactionist approach to the understanding of literacy in the Deaf community. We wish to focus here on ASL literacy and three distinct components of literacy: functional, cultural and critical literacies (McLaren, 1988; Williams & Snipper, 1990). Functional literacy involves basic language skills that enable a person to use ASL to communicate effectively in the DEAF-WORLD. Cultural literacy refers to the values, heritage, and shared experiences necessary to understand and interpret the relationships of ASL literary works to our lives as Deaf people. Critical literacy relates to the use of literature as a means of empowerment and an ideological aware-
ness of the DEAF-WORLD in relation to other worlds. Cummins (1994) and Baker (1993) have made it clear that educational programs involving linguistic minority group members that focus only on the development of functional literacy skills in the minority language do so at the expense of cultural and critical literacy, and that the result is disempowerment and limited educational success.

ASL Literature

Like most languages without a written form, ASL has a literature that has been passed down and shared within generations in a face-to-face manner. And like most languages having a rich “oral” literary tradition, the storytellers/poets of ASL have a respected and leading role in the nurturing and growth of ASL literature. One such storyteller/poet is Peter Cook, an innovative performer/educator. In his presentation at the recent 1996 ASL Literature Conference, Cook described the parameters of ASL literature by using an extended metaphor—a soup recipe.

According to Cook, the basic ingredients of ASL literature include not only the building blocks and grammar of ASL, but also miming and gestures that exploit the visual medium. Thus, in much the same way that the poetry of nonsigned languages use sound play and rhyme, ASL poetry uses visual play and sign rhymes. These basic ingredients need to simmer for a long time, as these features contribute a strong foundation for the literature. Simmering, practicing, tasting, and internalizing, the chef/artist can now create and innovate. Sample vegetables are chosen, a group of ideas to make up the flavor of a soup. Cook represents the techniques of ASL literary artists with spices, symbolizing the genres or forms for creating a visual literature—for example, alphabet or number stories, multipeople poems, manipulation of the speed of repeated movement patterns, or blending of the links between individual signs (transformations). The chef’s/artist’s selection of spices distinguishes the taste of unique works. Because the study of ASL literature is relatively young, Cook emphasizes the multitudes of undiscovered spices in the world—techniques to be borrowed from other art mediums and cultures. Important in this extended metaphor is the concept of sharing, particularly with young Deaf people who have a hunger for ASL literature, along with the fact that ASL literature is able to nourish new generations of artists.

The work of one student-poet from Rochester School for the Deaf, DeLee Windsor, illustrates the hunger for literature. This poem opens in a forest of trees. DeLee describes the trees being chopped down one by one. One tree, however, refuses to yield to the lumberjack’s blade, only to be left alone in a forest of tree stumps. As time passed and new trees began to sprout, the old tree told them stories of their ancestors to encourage their growth (Durr, 1996).

This student clearly exhibited much beyond basic functional literacy skills in ASL. Though not demonstrated here, DeLee not only signed comprehensibly, but also spiced his signs in unique and artistic ways. In terms of cultural literacy, the poem clearly illustrates the experience of isolation, the value of community roots to the DEAF-WORLD, and the responsibility felt toward future generations of Deaf children. In terms of critical literacy, there is insight into the experience of oppression and into the power of ASL literature to maintain and regenerate the DEAF-WORLD. Through performance of the poem, the student is empowered. Here is a literate young chef experimenting in the creation of ASL literature to feed the minds of a new generation.

DeLee Windsor’s poem is one example of how ASL literature is used for collective remembering and language maintenance (Padden, 1990). Being literate allows one access to and participation in the literary heritage of the DEAF-WORLD. Thus, educational programs need to be concerned with the development of functional, cultural, and critical literacies as well as with stimulating students’ natural hunger for literature. What is ASL literature? A hearty feast of soups set in front of hungry eyes.

Notes

1. We use DEAF-WORLD here in the same manner as Lane, Hoffmeister, and Bahan (1996) to describe the way in which minority language group members who use ASL refer to themselves, by following the convention of using English glosses (approximate translations of ASL sign equivalents) in capital letters.

2. With the advent and ease of videotaped technology, ASL literary works are becoming more widely available. The work of
Purves (1995) suggests that becoming familiar with videotechnology may become an important skill for literacy, and Lentz (1996) has demonstrated experimentation with how ASL poetry is presented via videotape.

References


