



# Japanese Sign Language Poetry and Music

**Lesson Plan:** Japanese Sign Language Poetry and Music

**Created by:** Andrew Campana, Cornell University

**Creation date:** December 19, 2023

**Keywords:** Anime, Pop Culture, Deafness, Japanese Sign Language

---

## Japanese Sign Language Poetry and Music

### Target Audience:

Undergraduate students, Graduate students

### Duration:

1 or 2 class sessions (plus additional class time for film screening)

### Learning Objectives:

Sign languages, including Japanese Sign Language (JSL), have enormously rich traditions of literary and artistic practice, including poetry, storytelling, dance, theater, and even rethinking music in a way that doesn't conflate listening with hearing. JSL poetry is one of the most important examples of a "Japanese literature" that is not in standard written or spoken Japanese, but in another language entirely. Teaching JSL is thus an important corrective to decades of Japan studies and Japanese literature courses that only include works in "Japanese." While this is a tricky topic to include in courses logistically—for the simple reason that

there is not much JSL literature available online, and none of it with a published English translation—I hope this lesson plan and additional resources will help to mitigate this oversight. This lesson also serves as an introduction to the artforms of sign language poetry and music more generally.

### **Potential Courses to Include this Lesson in:**

- Japanese literature courses (looking at JSL poetry as an important form of literature in Japan that is not in Japanese)
- Music, dance, and performance-related courses (especially in relation to the JSL music-based documentary *LISTEN*)
- Japanese film courses (again, in relation to *LISTEN* in particular)

### **Required Materials:**

For English translations/explanations of the following Japanese Sign Language poems, please contact [Andrew Campana](#) by email.

- Tanada Shigeru, "[Deaf Identity](#)" (Rō no aidentiti), 1998.
- Tanada Shigeru, "[Mt. Akagi](#)" (Akagi-san), 1997.
- Iino Emi, "[Dream](#)" (Yume), 2011.

Ella Mae Lentz, "[ASL Poem—To A Hearing Mother](#)," 2010, translated and subtitled in English.

- A wonderful and well-known American Sign Language poem to provide some further insights into the broader artform of sign language poetry.

*[LISTEN](#)* リッスン, a 2016 art documentary by Makihara Eri and DAKEI

- An incredible film focusing on Japanese Sign Language music (and some ASL poetry); there are also English-subtitled interviews with some of the subjects.

An in-class screening of a digital version of the film can be arranged (for a

reasonable fee) by contacting the creators (preferably in Japanese).

## Potential Readings:

Rachel Sutton-Spence, "What Is Sign Language Poetry?", in *Analysing Sign Language Poetry* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 13–24.

- A great introduction to the artform of sign language poetry (not about JSL in particular, but sign languages more generally).

*Signing the Body Poetic: Essays on American Sign Language Literature*, edited by H-Dirksen L. Bauman, Jennifer L. Nelson, and Heidi M. Rose (University of California Press, 2006).

- A fascinating collection of essays about ASL literature, within which the instructor can follow their own interest; I especially recommend the introduction and Christopher Krentz's chapter on the relation between sign literature and moving image media (which effectively act as a kind of "printing press").

Jaipreet Virdi, *Hearing Happiness: Deafness Cures in History* (University of Chicago Press, 2020)

- A fascinating cultural history that would provide another interesting comparative example and some historical framing of deafness and Deaf culture.

Karen Nakamura, "The Politics of Japanese Sign Language," in *Deaf in Japan: Signing and the Politics of Identity* (Cornell University Press: 2006).

- Still the most significant English-language academic work on Deaf communities in Japan and Japanese Sign Language; this chapter provides excellent context for the stakes of sign language and should be read by the instructor even if not assigned for the students. (The rest of the book also offers extremely valuable history of Japan's Deaf

communities.)

## **Background Information for Instructors:**

These works exist in relation to the fraught and complex history of the Deaf community in Japan, many of whom have been historically prohibited from learning sign language in schools; Karen Nakamura's book, mentioned in the potential readings above, provides an excellent introduction to this history up until around the year 2000.

## **Discussion Questions:**

1. What capacities does sign language literature have that written literature does not?
2. What makes sign language literature literary? Is it also a form of performance?
3. Even if you don't know a sign language, what are some obvious techniques that the signers in these works use to clearly mark their signing as poetic or musical (as opposed to regular, conversational sign language)?
4. The two Deaf directors of *LISTEN*, Eri Makihara (a filmmaker) and Dakei (a choreographer) wanted to make a film around the concept of "music born from silence"—not music made accessible to Deaf people (e.g. through sign language covers or through vibrations), but rethinking the concept of music itself through movement, inspired by Makihara's experience watching dance sequences in musicals, and Dakei's of discovering the "music" of Japanese dance (particularly through his experience as a butoh dancer). What are your thoughts on the portrayal of sign language music in the film? How might treating sign language music *as music* challenge the conventional definition of music, and what effect might opening up that definition have?
5. *LISTEN* features no sound at all; furthermore, in screenings, the filmmakers handed out earplugs, so that hearing audience members could experience the film in total silence (e.g. without hearing sounds

from other audience members, air conditioning, etc.). Why do you think the filmmakers made this decision?

6. The most common music-related works of sign language on YouTube tend to be of hearing people doing sign language interpretations of popular music, like this. Are these a form of sign language music? Why or why not? Are the main audiences for these videos hearing, or Deaf?

### **Relevant Vocabulary:**

Here is a great general guide for best practices in disability-related language by the Center for Disability Rights.