

Working with the ASL-English Interpreter in Your Classroom

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So there you are. It's the first day of classes. You're standing in front of a class of forty students (who, according to the department head, were only supposed to number twenty-five, at most) and to make matters worse, one of them is deaf and there's an interpreter! If you are like most college instructors you will probably smile weakly at the two and proceed as if nothing had changed, assuming that the interpreter will take care of the deaf student. Then, sixteen weeks later you may realize that the deaf student never really participated in class discussion and the other students never benefitted from the deaf student's unique presence in your classroom. Everyone, including the deaf student will have missed an opportunity.

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, there are more than 20,000 Deaf and/or Hard-of-Hearing (DHH) students currently attending colleges and universities in the United States however most will not complete a degree. On average, DHH students have a 71% dropout rate from 4-year institutions as compared to a 47% dropout rate for students without a disability. Students who dropout and are DHH, report feeling isolated and a lack connectedness with instructors, campus staff and hearing peers. Simply having an interpreter does not automatically mean that the DHH student will become fully integrated into the class. Several research studies have shown that DHH students report an improved educational experience when the instructor possesses knowledge of the role and function of the interpreter and takes steps to manage the classroom communication dynamics.

Most college instructors have never had an opportunity to talk to an interpreter and know little about the interpreter's role and responsibilities in a college classroom. The purpose of this article is two-fold: first to provide the college instructor with background information on the profession of ASL/English interpretation and second to offer guidance on how to best work with an interpreter in your classroom.

ASL-English Interpreters

The profession of ASL-English interpretation is a relatively young profession. The Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) is a national organization founded in 1964. As the official certifying body for ASL-English interpreters it established a code of professional behavior, maintains a national registry of certified interpreters and hosts conventions. Most states and large metropolitan areas have affiliated chapters.

Most ASL-English interpreters have attended one of the more than seventy interpreter education programs across the country and have a college degree in interpretation. These programs provide academic preparation in American Sign Language, the theory and practice of interpretation and teach ethical and professional practices as well as course work in the various aspects of Deaf Culture. Students of ASL-English interpretation complete an internship and most have been exposed to special vocabularies and settings (e.g. medical, social services, science, business, etc.).

ASL is not simply a visual form of English. It is a distinct language with its own syntax and grammar. Interpretation between ASL and English is not a verbatim process. Interpreters must first understand what is being said in English then determine an equivalent in ASL (and vice versa). This means that

interpreters are always behind the speaker by several seconds creating a lag which can be problematic with quickly paced turn-taking.

Fundamental to the interpretation process is trust. Hearing and DHH individuals wanting to communicate with each other place their trust in the interpreter that s/he will accurately communicate what is said. Interpreters follow a code of professional conduct and consciously make certain decisions regarding their behavior. They interpret all of the communication that occurs in the presence of the deaf student. That means relevant and irrelevant messages, off-color jokes, the two students arguing in the hall, the discriminatory comment about the “deaf and dumb kid” in the class – anything that hearing people would be able to hear. That is what is meant by “communication accessibility”. The interpreter in essence becomes the ears of the deaf student. Likewise, if the deaf student uses the interpreter to speak, the interpreter vocalizes the entire intent of the DHH student’s message.

In addition, interpreters remain impartial and maintain confidentiality. Interpreters are often involved in many aspects of the DHH student’s life. The same interpreter may interpret for the student’s classes, at health services, a religious support group, at the financial aid office and/or in connection with any of the other services on campus. Because interpreters have access to a great deal of private information, impartiality and confidentiality are strictly maintained.

The Sign Language Interpreter in Your Classroom

Interpreters have a unique role in the classroom. They generally sit in front of the classroom facing the DHH student so the instructor, board or other media are in close proximity and easily scanned by the DHH student. For the first few weeks of the semester the interpreter may attract a great deal of attention from unacquainted hearing students. Because of this high visibility some instructors and students naturally try to include interpreters in discussion or activities but to be actively involved with interpreting, interpreters must take a passive role in classroom participation. They will avoid offering opinion, even if asked directly. If having an interpreter present is new to students in your class, it’s important to create an opportunity for them to learn how best to use an interpreter. On the first day of class ask the interpreter and the DHH student to take five minutes to explain to the class what interpreting is and how best to use this support service. The following points are central to effective use of an interpreter:

- ASL-English interpreting is very much like spoken language interpreting except that it involves the use of the language of signs.
- Everything that is said is interpreted. Multiple conversations cannot be interpreted so it’s important that only one person speak at a time. An interpreter can only interpret what can be heard, so speak clearly.
- The DHH student should describe how best to communicate with her/him. If the DHH student wishes to use the interpreter when talking one-on-one it is easier for the interpreter if you speak directly to the deaf student, “I’d like to know how you feel about ...,” not “Ask him how he feels about ...” The first few times it will feel awkward because the deaf student will not be looking at you but at the interpreter.
- An interpreter is not a participating member of the class. If you have questions for the interpreter feel free to ask during none interpreting times before or after class.

- If the class will be dealing with sensitive or personal topics it would be important to add that interpreters regard all assignment-related information as confidential.

Once the interpreter's role and responsibilities are clear there are several additional factors that the instructor needs to remember.

Interpreters are not content experts and will need access to the course material to provide an accurate interpretation. It is helpful for the interpreter to have access to your college's on-line course management system (e.g. Black Board), a text book, and copies of all handouts. The instructor may also consider giving the interpreter a copy of the lecture notes before class starts. The interpreter will do a better job of interpreting if given a sense of what you hope to accomplish during the class session. Even briefly stating your class goals at the onset of the class will provide an advanced organizer for all of the students and the interpreter.

Most DHH students prefer to sit in the front of the class in order to easily see the instructor, the interpreter and the board. It is important to keep the lines of communication between the interpreter and the deaf student open by avoiding walking between them. Sometimes the interpreter may need to reposition. For example, if the class is discussing the circulatory system and the instructor moves to a model in the corner, it would be better for the interpreter to also be positioned next to the model. This way when the instructor points and says, "This is the aorta", both the interpreter and the deaf student can easily see what is being referenced.

Interpreting is a single channel event. By that I mean either the DHH student watches the interpreter or looks at the instructor, handout, media or computer. Unlike hearing students the DHH student cannot do both at the same time. This aspect of ASL interpretation tends to be difficult for instructors to accommodate because they are used to working with students that easily engage in multichannel communication. For this reason it's important to work closely with your interpreter. The interpreter may ask you to repeat the verbal part of your message or repeat where you just pointed. Allow the DHH students sufficient time to read the handout before moving to the next point.

Hearing students frequently change their eye gaze which helps reduce eye fatigue. For the DHH student watching an interpreter for any length of time creates eye fatigue. Make sure the room has adequate lighting and there are no visual distractions (e.g. a flashing florescent tube, bright sunny window). Creating opportunities for "visual breaks" will lessen eye fatigue and allow the DHH to concentrate.

Most colleges and universities have a policy requiring all movies and videos shown in the classroom be captioned in order to comply with federal accessibility laws. Contact the office for disability services for your college's policy or if you want to have a video captioned. Captioned media has been shown to benefit all students (not just the DHH students). Visual media is often designed to be fast paced, complex and dense. It will be difficult for the DHH student to read the captions and watch the visuals so it will be helpful for the instructor to provide a summary of the main points.

Interpreting is physically and mentally demanding. Depending on the length of your class, two interpreters may be assigned that switch every fifteen or twenty minutes. If you are a rapid speaker you may want to take steps to build in natural pauses to accommodate working with an interpreter. Don't try

to speak slower. This frequently becomes unnatural and awkward making the interpreting process more difficult. An effective strategy is to write the word “PAUSE” in your class notes at a natural stopping point to remind you to stop talking which will allow the interpreter to catch up. Without drawing undue attention to the interpreter don’t start talking again until the interpreter has dropped his/her hands and rested for 5-10 seconds. These pauses will also help all students to reflect on the material and/or take more complete notes.

There is a significant structural difference between written text and spontaneous speech. Written language tends to be more complex and intricate than speech. This makes the reading of written text very difficult to interpret. Allow the interpreter to read the entire passage before presenting it to the class. In addition, this difference makes interpreting student presentations particularly difficult. Students tend to read from their paper and they are usually nervous which results in an even faster pace. If students are reading prepared speeches, require a copy be provided to you in advance which can then be shared with the interpreter. Or you may want to discuss strategies that the class can use to make more effective presentations clearer and easier to understand for example using index cards or Power Point slides outlining the main points.

Interpreters in educational settings frequently rely on fingerspelling. Fingerspelling is a way of representing the English alphabet on the hand. Many English terms do not have a sign equivalent and therefore must be fingerspelled. For example, an anthropology class can discuss *australopithecus afarensis* (a.k.a. Lucy) without ever knowing how to spell the term. An interpreter must fingerspell the entire term and therefore needs to know the correct spelling. Orally presenting and then writing new vocabulary on the board will aid auditory as well as visual learners and greatly assist the interpreter.

Regardless of how well you prepare to work with the interpreter there will be times when the interpreter will need to interrupt you for a repetition of information or clarification of something just said. These interruptions do not always mean you are doing something wrong but that the interpreter may need additional help in deciphering the message. Sometimes the interpreter becomes engaged in a rather difficult translation and may miss subsequent information. Or an environmental noise, such as a student’s cough may obscure a particularly important word such as “not” or “don’t”. Try to remain open to interruptions and remember they are not meant to aggravate you but to carefully translate your ideas and thoughts.

Occasionally you may notice the interpreter and DHH student engaged in a conversation during class. The DHH student may have asked the interpreter to clarify something that was interpreted, (e.g. “That’s a new sign to me. What does it mean?”, “Would you spell that word again?, etc.) If these interchanges become distracting you should feel free to question the behavior. Checking in with the DHH and the interpreter before and/or after class keeps you involved and helps to maintain an atmosphere of open communication.

Tests may present a challenge for the DHH student. The DHH student may ask the interpreter to interpret all or part of a test. English is not the first language of many deaf students so written tests present a type of communication barrier. Often the DHH student will have difficulty not with the content being tested but with the wording of the question. Consider how a non-native speaker of English might perceive this question: “After reading the five short stories by Moore, what conclusion can you draw about her view of

feminism?” The deaf student, like many second-language learners might read the question as requiring one to *draw* a picture. The interpreter can be a great resource for you. Allow her/him to read through the exam and let you know of any potential language issues.

Seminars or more free flowing discussions present a special challenge to interpreters and DHH students. Such classes often exclude the DHH student if the class discussion is free flowing and turn-taking is quick. To process information correctly interpreters must lag behind the speaker sometimes by as much as several seconds. Conversationally this places the DHH student at a great disadvantage. When the DHH student perceives an opportunity to jump into the conversation the turn usually has been taken by someone else. Classes such as these also encourage multiple conversations creating an impossible situation for the interpreter. Discussing this issue with the class is often enough to heighten sensitivity. There is usually a self-appointed “conversational policeperson” who will point out when students are engaging in multiple conversations.

Class participation is often an expected behavior and frequently graded. To make sure the DHH student has an equal opportunity to participate by raising his/her hand, pause before calling on students to allow the interpreter ample time to interpret the question to the DHH student.

The inclusion of an interpreter in your classroom is an opportunity to reassess and enhance the communication dynamics. The best resource for additional information on the use of interpreters is the interpreter and the DHH student in your classroom. Take the opportunity to check in with them throughout the semester. The steps you take will improve the effectiveness of classroom communication for ALL of your students.

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