Empowering the Young Deaf Community

Amy Frasu, MA, CI, CT

As an interpreter, I find that educating hearing consumers about the interpreter's role is one of the most challenging parts of our profession. Regardless of skill level or setting, it is difficult to interpret for a person that lacks the knowledge necessary to use interpreting services. The consumer's ideas about interpreting are solely based on my actions, words, and any precedents I set for the future. Educating the hearing consumer is a key element of the interpreter's daily routine... but what about the deaf consumer? Who teaches deaf people how to use an interpreter?

Just as hearing people learn the rules and etiquette of interpreted situations, deaf people learn to use interpreters through experience. The major difference being that these experiences tend to happen at a young age. Schools that use interpreters carry a tremendous responsibility for shaping the ideas of deaf consumers and influencing the young Deaf Community - to empower or to oppress.

Interpreters are professionals responsible for unbiased facilitation of communication; however there is no question that the interpreter's presence effects every interpreted situation. In a school setting, there are two categories of experiences - academics and socialization; the interpreting process is a professional relationship superimposed on top of these experiences.

Because the mainstreaming/inclusion approach is still considered the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) by most public school administrators, placing an interpreter in the classroom seems to be a reasonable accommodation. On paper it appears that this will be a successful formula:

deaf student + interpreter + regular education teacher + hearing students =
LRE, $, and success

Unfortunately, the placement of a deaf student in a mainstream classroom is often done with little proactive thought. Therefore, in reality the formula tends to look more like this:

deaf student + inexperience with an interpreter & language delay + unskilled signer + "helper" approach
+ regular education teacher + low expectations & ignorance + hearing students + pity & fear =
negative outcomes (blamed on the deaf student's "disability")

In order to change this scenario to a more positive and empowering learning environment for the deaf student, it is necessary to analyze the purpose of the educational interpreter - to facilitate communication through use of sign language, spoken English, cultural mediation, and knowledge about accessibility. Because of the many complex factors involved in this process, it is sometimes easier to consider non-examples of interpreting (what interpreters should not do) as a guide.

Role Conflicts - "Tutor" is a Four-Letter Word

A role conflict occurs when an interpreter acts beyond ethical boundaries, therefore sending mixed signals about the role of the interpreter. Tutoring is a classic example of role conflict in a classroom setting. If an interpreter gives the student her views about how to solve a math problem, the meaning of a vocabulary word, or which topics to read for a homework assignment, this action immediately causes a breakdown in communication between the deaf student and his teacher and peers. Over time, this pattern may lead to power struggles, codependency, authority ambiguity, and many other difficulties. It may also cause role confusion from the teacher's perspective, creating expectations for the interpreter to assume additional responsibilities (e.g. supervision of students, curriculum development, evaluation of progress, and discipline.)

Suspension of Disbelief

Similar to an actor, an interpreter must "become" several characters - the teacher, the friend, the voice on the intercom, the principal, the boy, the girl, and countless others. Trust is an integral part of this process. If the interpreter acts as a disciplinarian in the student's life, it would be difficult for the student to feel relaxed when the interpreter is present. The student may view the interpreter as an authority figure at inappropriate times, therefore causing mistrust and discomfort.

Mainstreaming - One Size Does Not Fit All

Not all deaf students are good candidates for using an interpreter to gather information. The student must have sufficient language, memory, and social skills to understand who is speaking, how to take turns in a conversation, and integration of background knowledge with new information.

A deaf student that is unsuccessful in a regular education classroom may need to be moved to a different placement where interpreters are not necessary for communication, such as a school for the deaf. Another arrangement may be for a teacher of the deaf to reinforce lessons with the student and provide support to the classroom teacher.

A deaf student with multiple disabilities and/or severe emotional problems may need additional accommodations in order to learn. In this type of situation, it may be necessary to use an interpreter and an assistant or teacher in order to make accommodations for the student's individual needs. Interpreters are not companions and should not be expected to mentor a student under any circumstances.

The Oxymorons of Interpreting

An oxymoron is the use of two words together that contradict each other, creating a nonsensical expression. Oxymorons in the field of educational interpreting include:

"qualified tutor" -
This label is incompatible, regardless of the interpreter's credentials. Although most interpreters are not trained to teach, qualifications to instruct are irrelevant. The interpreter's priority should be focused on student-to-teacher or student-to-peer communication.

"teacher-directed tutor" -
Often the interpreter is placed with the student and expected to plan, instruct, and evaluate the student's learning under direction of the teacher. This places the interpreter in a situation that does not involve interpreting and is therefore not appropriate. Although the activities may seem simple to carry out, they undermine the basic goal of education - for the deaf student to interact with her teacher and peers, to succeed academically and socially, and to become a contributing member of society. Relying on an interpreter as an instructor does not support this goal.

"interpreter/assistant" or "interpreter/tutor" -
These are two distinct occupations and should not be combined. There should be a clear difference between responsibilities of the interpreter and duties of the assistant.

The following charts outline two situations - a classroom with an Interpreter/Tutor and a classroom with a Professional Interpreter. The charts compare the perspectives of each individual affected.

Classroom with an Interpreter/Tutor
Student: • unable to work alone or make decisions • feels unintelligent compared to hearing students • does not take responsibility for his education • views the teacher as a less valuable resource because the teacher cannot sign
Interpreter: • presents and clarifies content as a second-hand source • creates role conflicts • hinders communication by obstructing interaction between the deaf student and hearing people in the school
Assistant: • N/A
Teacher (Mainstream Classroom): • left out of process • underestimated • emphasis is on communication (lack of sign language fluency) rather than on teaching skills • the teacher/student relationship is weak • sees student as an exception to rules rather than as a part of the class • views the interpreter as an assistant that follows the deaf student
Teacher of the Deaf: • finds out about the mainstream situation by asking the interpreter to disclose confidential information • relies on the interpreter to assess the student's needs
Administrator: • views multiple roles as cost-effective • complications are overlooked due to lack of experience

Classroom with a Professional Interpreter
Student:
• independent thinker
• accepts successes and failures as his own
• relationships with adults and peers are strengthened through interaction
• forms opinions about the teacher based on personality (instead of sign language abilities)
Interpreter:
• interprets (facilitates communication)
• fosters autonomy by interpreting neutrally
• does not offer opinions or advice
• educates about visual accessibility (closed captioning, line of sight, etc.)
Assistant:
• companion/mentor for students with multiple disabilities
• provides aid for physical needs
• tutors (skill drills, etc.)
• assist teachers with clerical work
Teacher (Mainstream Classroom):
• valued as a professional educator
• views deaf student as a capable member of the class
• evaluation of the student's progress is based on experiences in class and observation of the student's work (instead of the interpreter's untrained opinions)
• views the interpreter as a skilled professional that interprets for everyone in the classroom
Teacher of the Deaf:
• communicates with staff members without using the interpreter as an informant
• expert about literacy issues, social inclusion, accessibility, accommodations, and adaptation of the regular curriculum
Administrator:
• part of comprehensive team that meets the student's needs
• informed and comfortable with interpreting issues

Deaf Community Stakeholders

Deaf adults, teachers of the deaf, sign language interpreters, parents of deaf children, and deaf children themselves could be considered "stakeholders" in the future of the Deaf Community. Each stakeholder may support a different philosophy or methodology, but ultimately each person is invested in seeing deaf students lead successful lives. These people would most likely agree that fostering independence in deaf students is a sensible and necessary component of deaf education.

In a survey of 30 Deaf Community stakeholders, 77% of the participants stated that deaf students should become assertive about their interpreting needs and preferences at a very young age. The remaining 23% also advocated that deaf students should be assertive, but not until at least 14 years of age. This group of people unanimously deemed assertiveness a positive quality for deaf students.

The same survey yielded a divided perspective about whether or not interpreters should tutor deaf students. When asked, "Is tutoring by the interpreter an appropriate accommodation for deaf students in grades K-12?" the answers were: 30% = yes, 23% = yes (with specific conditions), 13% = no (under certain circumstances), 30% = no, and 3% = undecided.

Survey Participants
Deaf Person - 6
Deaf Person/Teacher - 1
Interpreter - 10
Teacher of the Deaf - 3
Interpreter/Teacher of the Deaf - 1
Parent of a deaf child - 1
Interpreter/Teacher of the Deaf/Parent - 1
Interpreter Educator - 2
Student (Interpreter Training Program) - 2
Other - 2
Questions/Results
Do you think it is beneficial for deaf students to become assertive about their interpreting needs and preferences? Yes = 77% Conditional Yes = 23% Conditional No = 0% No = 0% Undecided = 0%
Is tutoring by the interpreter an appropriate accommodation for deaf students in grades K-12? Yes = 30% Conditional Yes = 23% Conditional No = 13% No = 30% Undecided = 3%

Advocates in favor of tutoring stated many opinions:
Deaf students need support in their studies. The interpreter knows the student's strengths and weaknesses. If the interpreter is qualified to tutor, it is a wonderful advantage for the deaf student to reinforce what is learned in the classroom. The location of tutoring should be considered carefully because it might be embarrassing for the student to be singled out during class. Overall, tutoring is a crucial component of educational interpreting.

Opponents of interpreters as tutors had many statements about this issue as well:
Why would someone waste a valuable resource like a trained teacher and use an interpreter to tutor instead? Most interpreters have no training or expertise in instruction. The interpreter should not try to re-teach material that was deleted or ambiguous during class due to lack of interpreting skills. Using an interpreter as a tutor does not prepare the student for life as an adult. Tutoring could cause confusion for everyone involved. The teacher needs to evaluate what the student knows and does not know. The interpreter should interpret, period.

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The Answer is Autonomy

Although professionals are unable to come to a clear consensus about the educational interpreter's role, it is apparent that deaf students need more than tutoring services to help them lead independent lives. Hearing students are given the opportunity to learn from a variety of people, experiences, and routines. Deaf students of all ages deserve the same freedoms and responsibilities that come with self-determination.

Interpreting services are listed on most IEPs in reference to hours, cost, and the school district's language philosophy. IEPs have goals for math, English, behavior, and other areas. What about the skills the student will need to become an assertive and knowledgeable consumer? IEP goals should address interpreting consumer skills throughout all grade levels, but this area of education is often overlooked. Young deaf students are sent into class, expected to look only to the interpreter for guidance.

Dependence on the interpreter causes the student to share ownership of learning, therefore successes and failures are never truly the student's own achievements. Given a skilled and ethical interpreter in an appropriate classroom placement, any deaf student can perform independently. Beginning as early as kindergarten, a deaf student can choose to follow class rules and procedures, accept accountability for all assignments, participate in academic and social situations, pay attention to key information during instruction, setup an appropriate line-of-sight, and request content clarification without interference from the interpreter.

As the student gets older, she can move higher through levels of autonomy. By middle school or high school, a deaf student should be able to state preferences about a specific interpreting mode and style, provide detailed feedback about the interpreter's performance, actively participate in interpreter scheduling (e.g. cancellations, special appointments) request accommodations in the classroom (e.g. closed captioned videos, notetaking, adequate lighting), and accurately explain the role of the interpreter. The IEP goals should guide the student from simple to complex tasks of independent thinking.

Active learning happens through experiences, successes/mistakes, and adjustments. With the interpreter present to facilitate communication, not to interfere, the deaf student can learn how to control her behavior in the world around her - in kindergarten and beyond.

Sign Language Interpreting is a very new field compared to most professions. 100 years ago, teachers were not allowed to get married or dye their hair. They were not required to have a college degree. 50 years ago no one knew about Deaf Culture, ASL, RID, ADA, or PL-94-142. I look forward to seeing the changes in interpreting over the next several decades. More than anything, I look forward to today's deaf youth becoming a strong and thriving Deaf Community.

Amy Frasu has worked as a community interpreter in California, Texas, Washington DC, and Florida. Amy earned her Bachelor of Arts degree in Deaf Education and Elementary Education from Flagler College. In 2005, she graduated with honors from Gallaudet University with her Master of Arts degree in Interpretation. Amy has been an ASL-English interpreter since 1994 and has worked in a variety of settings, including: medical appointments, business meetings, conferences, video relay service, theater, k-12 schools, undergraduate courses, and graduate courses.

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