

Working with an ASL-English Interpreter & Providing Visual Accessibility for Deaf Students

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Providing Access

Communication access is a right. All students deserve full access to their educational environment.

When a Deaf student is taught in a public school, it is the school's responsibility to provide the necessary accommodations that create equal access for that student. One component of providing accessibility for academic and social situations may be to hire a qualified ASL-English interpreter.

What is interpreting?

The interpreter's job is to facilitate communication.

A typical American classroom uses one language to communicate - spoken English. Many Deaf students use American Sign Language to receive information and communicate. Without a mediator to interpret these auditory-based and visually-based languages, the classroom environment may not be accessible.

An interpreter uses American Sign Language (ASL) and spoken English to bridge this communication gap. Information the interpreter hears is conveyed to the Deaf student. Information the Deaf student expresses is conveyed to the teacher and the other students. This process provides each participant with the opportunity to communicate freely.

What is NOT interpreting?

Professional boundaries must be clearly defined in order for the interpreter to function appropriately.

The interpreter's responsibility is to bridge communication gaps through use of American Sign Language, spoken English, cultural mediation, and knowledge about accessibility. The interpreter is not a teacher, a tutor, an aide, nor a counselor for the Deaf student.

In any classroom, the teacher is the absolute authority figure. The teacher has been trained in strategies to instruct, discipline, supervise, and evaluate students. The teacher is responsible for monitoring the Deaf student's academic progress.

Will working with an interpreter be distracting?

Working as a team benefits everyone involved.

When you are working with an interpreter, please speak at a normal rate. If the interpreter needs you to clarify or repeat any information, he or she may ask you questions. Although people might initially be distracted by the novelty of watching an interpreter, they will still be able to pay attention during a meeting or lecture.

Ethics of Interpreting

Professional interpreters have a strict Code of Professional Conduct (www.rid.org/coe.html).

- All interpreted information is confidential.
- The interpreter cannot interfere, advise, or interject personal opinions into interpreted situations.
- Interpreters are professionals, and must conduct themselves appropriately.

Preparation

There is no such thing as too much information.

Interpreters must clearly understand what they are hearing and seeing in order to accurately interpret information. Working with the interpreter to prepare for class activities will help the student to benefit from a deeply processed interpretation.

Summaries of upcoming instruction, discussions, key vocabulary, videos, projects, and special class events can give the interpreter the necessary background knowledge to interpret new facts and concepts to the student. Lesson plans, handouts, and textbooks are incredible resources.

The Need to Rest

Without adequate rest, permanent injury can occur.

Interpreting is physically and mentally draining. The ideal amount of time for one interpreter to provide services is 20-30 minutes. At this point the interpreter should switch with a second interpreter or take a break of at least five minutes. Taking the steps to rest periodically allows the interpreter to perform better and to avoid cumulative motion injuries.

Assessing the Access

Interpreting is a method of providing accessibility, but there are many other considerations.

Deaf students rely on their vision to learn. Whether the student is expected to watch an interpreter, an experiment, a videotape, examples on the board, a demonstration, or information on a handout - all messages are gathered visually.

Therefore, important considerations are:

- **one message at a time** - If you expect the Deaf student to understand more than one message at a time, missed information is unavoidable. The most effective teaching strategy is to use sequenced actions instead of simultaneous actions. This may be accomplished by:
 - Using a multiple-step approach - As separate steps, verbally describe a concept, then show the concept with objects or writing. After the demonstration, review the concept again. This allows the Deaf student to see all of the messages that the hearing students hear and observe (as opposed to showing a concept while talking about it at the same time, causing the Deaf student to miss valuable information.)
 - Speaking one at a time during class discussions - This gives the Deaf student (and the interpreter) a clear understanding of the discussion's content. With a clear turn-taking process, the Deaf student is given more opportunity to join the discussion.
 - Using closed captioning during videos - Captioning allows the student to follow the action of the movie while still being able to read the words being spoken.

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- **wait time** - Interpreting does not happen instantly. The interpreter must hear, understand, and sign each thought, using several seconds of processing time. Waiting about 3 to 5 extra seconds for the Deaf student to comprehend messages will give him or her the chance to comment at the same time as the rest of the class. Wait time is often beneficial for hearing students as well.
 - **line of sight** - The student should be able to see all important visual messages (the interpreter, teacher, other students, board/projector screen, TV, etc.) from the best possible position. This may require flexible seating assignments for each activity.
 - **adequate lighting** - In order to receive visual messages, the student must have enough light to see clearly.
 - **notetaking services** - Some Deaf students prefer to use a copy of another student's lecture notes. This allows the Deaf student to actively participate in class, while still receiving materials to study and review at a later time.
 - **other considerations** - Every student is different. Individual needs must be evaluated before deciding what creates an accessible environment for each Deaf student.
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Other Resources about Deafness & Interpreting:

- [National Association of the Deaf](http://www.nad.org) – www.nad.org
 - [Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf](http://www.rid.org) – www.rid.org
 - [Deaf Linx](http://www.deaflinx.com) – www.deaflinx.com
 - [General Job Description for Educational Interpreters](http://www.deaflinx.com/Interpreting/terpjob.html) - <http://www.deaflinx.com/Interpreting/terpjob.html>
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Summary

- The interpreter's responsibility is to bridge communication gaps through use of American Sign Language, spoken English, cultural mediation, and knowledge about accessibility.
- In any classroom, the teacher is the absolute authority figure.
- As ethical professionals, interpreters must respect consumers' right to confidentiality and independence.
- Helping the interpreter review and prepare for upcoming class activities will help to shape a clearly processed interpretation.
- Resting periodically allows the interpreter to perform better and to avoid cumulative motion injuries.
- Interpreting is one part of providing accessibility. There are many other considerations to be made, such as: arranging for one message at a time, wait time, line of sight, adequate lighting, notetaking services, and consideration of each student's individual needs.

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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