

At First Glance: Taking a Look at

Deaf Education and Interpreting in

K–12 Classrooms

Sign language interpreters are the channel through which many Deaf and hard of hearing students access and participate in academic and social interactions in public schools.¹ Yet, “educating children with the use of an interpreter is an educational experiment” (Schick, 2004). To complicate matters further, research has shown that interpreters perform multiple roles in the classroom (Antia & Kreimeyer, 2001; Jones, 1993, 1994, 2004), yet very little is known about what K–12 interpreters actually do. Moreover, there has been no research on the factors that inform their moment-to-moment decisions. This volume presents the results of a study that was designed to discover the range of activities and responsibilities performed by educational interpreters and to illuminate the factors they consider when making decisions.

Signed languages are visual languages. The importance of this quality was emphasized almost 100 years ago by George Veditz, a prominent leader in the Deaf community and former president of the National Association of the Deaf. Veditz (1912) delivered a passionate argument in support of American Sign Language, even in the face of intense political pressures, punctuated by the 1880 decision in Milan, Italy, to ban the use of sign language in schools for Deaf children. In this address, he characterized Deaf people as “first, last, and of all time the people of the eye.” The fundamentally visual nature of American Sign Language

1. The term *Deaf*, with a capital *D*, is used to denote affiliation with and value of American Sign Language and Deaf cultural norms. Throughout this volume, students who use the services of sign language interpreters in public schools will be referred to as *Deaf and hard of hearing students*.

and the people who use it validated his case for the preservation of this language at a time when it seemed on the verge of eradication. Nearly a century later, some Deaf leaders are celebrating the process of discovering what it truly means to be Deaf (Ladd, 2003) and championing the essential aspect of vision as being at its core (Bahan, 2004, 2008; Lentz, 2007).

INTERPRETERS AND ACCESS LEGISLATION: EDUCATIONAL PLACEMENT OF DEAF AND HARD OF HEARING STUDENTS

Some Deaf and hard of hearing students attend special state residential schools, but the passage of legislation requiring that children with special needs be integrated into public schools dramatically increased the demand for educational interpreters. Since the implementation of Public Law 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1975), renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in 1990 and now called the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA), most Deaf and hard of hearing students go to schools with students who can hear rather than to segregated schools for Deaf children. Some of these students are placed in self-contained classrooms with all Deaf and hard of hearing students. Many others are mainstreamed in classes with hearing teachers, hearing peers, and a sign language interpreter.

In mainstream contexts, Deaf and hard of hearing students rely on interpreters for primary access to communication within the academic environment, including access to curriculum and instruction as well as social interactions. The IDEA legislation mandates a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) to all children. If specified in an Individualized Education Program (IEP), Deaf and hard of hearing students must have qualified sign language interpreters who interpret between the spoken English and the signed communication that takes place in the classroom. The definition of *qualified* varies from state to state, and some states have not yet established clear and specific standards of qualification for sign language interpreters in public schools.

The Gallaudet Research Institute's 2002–2003 *Annual Survey of Deaf and Hard of Hearing Children and Youth* reported that 23.4% of approximately 40,000 Deaf children in U.S. elementary and secondary settings used sign language interpreters. Another 16.5% had instructional aides in the classroom. In the 2003–2004 survey, there was little change: 23.1% reported working with sign language interpreters and

17.8% reported working with instructional aides. Since employees who interpret as part of their daily job duties may sometimes be classified as instructional aides, the actual percentage of Deaf students who rely on interpreting in the classroom may be even higher than reported. According to the same report, approximately 60% of Deaf and hard of hearing students were identified as being integrated with hearing students for at least part of the day. Over 35% of Deaf and hard of hearing students in California were at least partially integrated with hearing students. In the 2007–2008 national survey, 22.9% of students receiving instructional support services reported accessing instruction through sign language interpreters (Gallaudet Research Institute, 2003, 2004, 2008).

ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE OF DEAF AND HARD OF HEARING STUDENTS

Some students who are Deaf and hard of hearing do not perform as well academically as their hearing peers. Several factors potentially influence academic outcomes, including use of sign language in the home, age of intervention, amount of hearing loss, and quality of education and support structures.

Most Deaf and hard of hearing children have parents who are not Deaf or hard of hearing. According to Mitchell and Karchmer (2004), 92% of Deaf children are from families with two hearing parents, and 8% have at least one Deaf or hard of hearing parent. Only 4% of children have two Deaf parents. The high percentage of Deaf children with hearing parents is significant for several reasons. Although a signed language may be the most logical choice for a student who cannot hear a spoken language, most hearing parents with a Deaf child do not know sign language. Some researchers suggest that “young deaf children of hearing parents frequently do not have any truly accessible and competent language models, either for sign language or for spoken language” (Marschark, Lang, & Albertini, 2002, p. 12).

Although hearing parents typically serve as fluent language models for their hearing children, they are less prepared to make language accessible to children who cannot hear. Even if parents decide to learn sign language, they will often be less than proficient models of sign language since they are learning sign language along with their children. In addition, hearing parents are often uninformed about effective strategies for communicating visually with their Deaf or hard of hearing children.

This can have a profound impact not only on the language acquisition and cognitive-academic achievement of these children, but also on their socioemotional development.

Studies indicate that Deaf children who are exposed to signing at an early age perform better academically than those who are not (Calderon & Greenberg, 1997; Mayberry & Eichen, 1991; Moores, 1996; Moores & Meadow-Orlans, 1990). The most accurate predictor of academic achievement appears to be early intervention (Marschark et al., 2002; Moeller, 2000; Yoshinaga-Itano, Sedey, Coulter, & Mehl, 1998), regardless of whether parents choose sign language or favor another approach to making communication accessible to their children. Parents must seek and evaluate medical advice to make decisions about communication options as well as education for their Deaf or hard of hearing child. Critical time passes while hearing parents try to determine how best to provide access to language, and to learn to communicate effectively with their child. As a result, Deaf and hard of hearing children may not be exposed to sign language and other interventions during the most critical years for language acquisition. Even if parents begin to learn sign language along with their children, the children typically are not exposed to fluent sign language during all of their waking hours. In contrast, of course, hearing children have the obvious advantage of constant and consistent exposure to spoken language.

Like U.S. students who are native speakers of languages other than English, Deaf and hard of hearing students' English literacy skills often peak at about the fourth grade level, with the consequence that Deaf and hard of hearing students do not perform as well academically as their hearing peers (Allen, 1986; Holt, 1993; Marschark et al., 2002; Schildroth & Hotto, 1994). Academic success for Deaf and hard of hearing students is compromised by the challenge of reading and writing English, which in turn inhibits entry into postsecondary institutions. One study found that only 3% of Deaf 18-year-olds read as well as their hearing peers (Traxler, 2000). Other research provides further validation of the problem, reporting that about 83% of students admitted to the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID) at the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) in 2001 and 2002 did not have "the requisite reading and language skills to enter a baccalaureate program in their first year" (Cuculick & Kelly, 2003, p. 279).

Besides age of intervention and signing in the home, another significant factor contributing to academic underachievement among Deaf and hard of hearing students is the communication policies within K-12 schools. Oddly, clear, accessible communication is often not provided at school.

Not even teachers who are credentialed to teach Deaf and hard of hearing children are held to rigorous sign language proficiency standards. What is more, since Marschark et al. (2005a, p. 57) “estimates that over 75% of deaf children are mainstreamed, receiving the bulk of their academic experience in circumstances mediated by sign language interpreters” (Peterson & Monikowski, 2010, p.129), one factor worthy of consideration is the impact educational interpreters are likely to have on the learning outcomes and school experiences of Deaf and hard of hearing students.

SCHOOL COMMUNICATION POLICIES

Historically, there has been much controversy about the language of instruction appropriate for the education of Deaf and hard of hearing children and youth. Heated debates continue to rage about whether students should be taught using American Sign Language (ASL), which is a language distinct from English with its own grammatical rules and vocabulary, or through a form of contact signing in which signs are used following rules for English syntax. Some educators and administrators promote the use of a signing system developed to map modified signs onto English vocabulary and grammar in the hopes of teaching English to Deaf and hard of hearing children. A few of these systems persist in spite of questionable outcomes in improving literacy among Deaf and hard of hearing students. Still others advocate that sign language should not be used at all, providing as rationale that students who are allowed to sign will not develop the ability to speak and lipread English, since sign language will take less effort for Deaf and hard of hearing students. Controversy among scholars and researchers has led many schools to establish language policies to mandate whether interpreters should “interpret” into ASL or “transliterate,” which means to produce a more literal rendition of the spoken English, using ASL signs while emphasizing the vocabulary, syntax, and pronunciation (e.g., lip movements) of spoken English words. These language policies often become directives for sign language interpreters.

GOALS OF INCLUSION

The premise of mainstreaming lies in the belief that Deaf and hard of hearing students who use sign language interpreters in K–12 settings have

access to and can participate fully in K–12 school activities. While Deaf and hard of hearing students deserve the same quality education that is afforded to hearing students, studies show that although Deaf and hard of hearing students may be integrated in classes with hearing peers, they are not truly included (Kurz & Langer, 2004; Komesaroff & McLean, 2006; La Bue, 1998; Lane, 1995; Power & Hyde, 2002; Ramsey, 1997; Russell, 2006).

Research clearly shows there is still a long way to go before Deaf and hard of hearing children and adolescents truly have access to the resources and support that will allow them to achieve their fullest potential. These children have long been denied the opportunity to access, let alone fully participate in academic and social activities leading to school success. Like English-language learners, students in impoverished or rural areas, students with special needs, and other children who do not have access to the cultural capital of mainstream American society, they have been systematically excluded from rich opportunities for learning.

The premise of inclusion is that Deaf and hard of hearing students will be provided the same quality of instruction and opportunity for learning as their hearing peers (Schick, 2004). Along with academic, linguistic, and cognitive development, socioemotional development through participation and peer interaction is another schooling outcome that deserves attention. School environments are structured “communities of learners” (Lave & Wenger, 1991)² in which Deaf and hard of hearing students must be afforded full membership. If Deaf and hard of hearing students are relegated to mere bystander status, then the promise of inclusion is hollow.

IMPACT OF INTERPRETERS ON THE SCHOOL EXPERIENCES OF DEAF STUDENTS

Although very few studies have been conducted in K–12 classrooms with working interpreters, the extant literature indicates the urgency of research in this area. Because most Deaf and hard of hearing children

2. Wenger and Lave coined the term *community of practice* to describe an apprenticeship model of learning, in which the community acts as a living curriculum for the apprentice. “Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (Wenger, 2006).

are born to parents who are not fluent in sign language, these children may not be not proficient users of any language, including sign language, when they reach school age. Even if the children have limited language proficiencies, do not know sign language, or do not know how to use interpreters to navigate the school system, they may still be assigned an interpreter for all or part of the day. This means that interpreters in public schools may very well be the children's first adult language models. Along with the tremendous responsibility of being a competent language model, interpreters often provide the primary, if not the exclusive, avenue of students' access to academic content and social discourse.

It is important to carefully examine what interpreters do in the course of their work with Deaf and hard of hearing students in mainstream K–12 classrooms and what needs arise from the interactions taking place among interpreters, students, and teachers, as well as the strategies, knowledge, and skills interpreters employ when making decisions about their work. This knowledge will provide a starting point for examining the degree to which access and inclusion are possible via an interpreted education. In addition, it will provide a better understanding of the potential effects interpreters have on the educational experiences of Deaf and hard of hearing students in public schools. Improved practice alone cannot guarantee enhanced learning outcomes, but exploring the pitfalls and possibilities of an interpreter-mediated education is a step in that direction: Empirical investigation of the work of interpreters in mainstream settings is vital to gain a clearer picture of ways in which to improve the state of Deaf education. Only through a better understanding of the work of K–12 interpreters can we begin to acknowledge their influence on the school experiences of Deaf and hard of hearing students. A deeper understanding of the responsibilities of the job is necessary to improve both the education of interpreters and practice of interpreting in educational settings.

ADEQUACY OF PREPARATION AND CONFUSION OF ROLES AND EXPECTATIONS

A substantial number of K–12 interpreters report not having been adequately prepared for employment when they were hired (Jones, 1993, 2004; Togioka, 1990). One area of confusion is the distinction between the roles and responsibilities that should be taken on by interpreters in K–12 settings and those that should remain with the classroom teacher

or other members of the educational team. My own observations are consistent with these reports.

As the director and full-time faculty member of the American Sign Language-English interpreting program at Palomar College, I often hear from graduates regarding the challenge of interpreting in K–12 settings. More than half of the students who graduate from our interpreting program find employment in educational settings,³ and many former students have informed me that they did not feel prepared for the jobs they obtained after graduating with an associate’s degree in interpreting. The lack of preparation that has been reported continually for the past 20 years (since, e.g., Gustason, 1985; Stuckless, Avery, & Hurwitz, 1989) is of grave concern. Of equal concern is the fact that due to the time constraints imposed by a 2-year program, the curricular requirements are extremely demanding and the program so time consuming that it is quite common for less than half of the students who enter our interpreting program to complete it successfully. Clearly, a 50% retention rate does not provide evidence of effective teaching and scaffolding, nor is it a sign of reasonable expectations for students. It is, however, a statistic that must be acknowledged. Half of interpreting graduates will likely serve at some point in their early careers as language models for Deaf and hard of hearing students, significantly affecting those students’ learning experiences and therefore their post–high school career and higher education options. As an educator of interpreters who often gain employment in K–12 settings, I have an acute interest in the role that interpreters play in the education of Deaf children and hard of hearing children, and I am committed to high standards in the education of interpreters.

One student who graduated with an associate’s degree in interpreting from Palomar College and then went on to get a baccalaureate degree in Deaf Studies with an Emphasis in Interpreting from a university with a program that is well respected by the Deaf community contacted me to request information and resources about educational interpreting. She was certified by the only national organization in the United States of sign language interpreters, the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID), and she had worked as an interpreter for 1 year each at two different high schools.

3. In the Palomar College interpreting program, students must complete four 4-unit semester-length ASL classes before they can enroll in two years of interpreting coursework, for a total of four academic years of coursework.

After working for 2 years as an educational interpreter, she began working as a freelance interpreter. However, she often found herself back in the schools. When she contacted me looking for good references related to educational interpreting, I asked her why she was looking. She replied, “To be honest, the reason I am looking for more info on educational interpreting is just for more clarity. I think that it can be a sticky area to interpret. A lot of different ethical issues come up weekly, most of the time dealing with your role in the classroom. It seems like everyone I talk to has a varying opinion of answers to sticky situations.” This interpreter went on to say that she had been disheartened by an article (Corwin, 2007) in the January 2007 issue of the *RID Views* (RID’s monthly newsletter) and the subsequent editorial response (T. Smith, 2007) to the article, both of which, she felt, reflected a clear lack of consensus regarding the role of K–12 interpreters. (The article discussed historical perceptions of educational interpreters and the controversy about the RID board’s decision to accept interpreters who had passed the Educational Interpreter Performance Assessment (EIPA) at a level 4.0 or above as certified members of the organization.)

Other nationally certified interpreters have expressed to me in conversation their discomfort and/or uncertainty about what is expected of interpreters working in mainstream classrooms, stating that educational interpreting has different requirements than interpreting in other settings. In spite of the fact that many interpreters are underprepared for employment in K–12 schools, I have noticed that upon entering the interpreting program some of my students mistakenly assume that interpreting at the elementary level would be easy or boring. My own experiences interpreting in elementary school settings have led me to a different conclusion.

INTERPRETING IN PRIMARY GRADES DURING MY EARLY INTERPRETING YEARS

I am a nationally certified interpreter. I hold a Certificate of Interpretation and a Certificate of Transliteration (CI and CT) from RID and a Level V: Master from the National Association of the Deaf (NAD).⁴ I worked for a short time as an interpreter at the high school level, passing

4. After 2006, these tests were no longer offered. NAD and the RID instead jointly developed a certification instrument called the NAD-RID National Interpreting Certificate (NIC).

the ASL-to-spoken-English segment of the district's in-house evaluation at their highest level, in spite of the fact that I incorrectly interpreted several facts from the story told in ASL by an elementary-school-aged Deaf boy. Overlooking time indicators, my interpretation (as I recall) had him pull out his loose tooth at least four times before he actually pulled it out. Prior to that evaluation, I had never seen a signer under the age of 18.

I also faced an unfamiliar set of challenges when I had occasion to interpret for several long field trips at the elementary level. Roberto was in fourth grade when I first met him. I was the interpreter for a week-long field trip to an historical area of town. Students went out to different buildings and settings to observe and learn about the ways of life of people who used to occupy the region. I had been the interpreter for Roberto's group throughout the week. Roberto and several of his classmates, including some in his group, were profoundly Deaf. I had worked as an interpreter in postsecondary settings for several years, but I was completely unprepared for this light-hearted, fun-filled, fourth-grade field trip.

Every morning, 50 to 60 children filled a room in preparation for the daily activities. Sometimes the teachers would introduce the children to vocabulary or content that might be encountered later in the day. Sometimes they would just play games or sing songs until all the school buses had arrived from the various schools. One of my first challenges was trying to interpret a children's song designed to increase awareness of the phonology of vowels. The lyrics of the song are simple:

I like to eat
I like to eat
I like to eat
Eat apples and bananas.

The song is sung several times in a row, and each time, all of the vowels are replaced with the long vowel sound of a targeted vowel. For example, if the vowel *a* were specified, the task would be to replace the vowel sound in all of the words with the long *a* (/ā/) sound:

Ā lāke tā āte
Ā lāke tā āte
Ā lāke tā āte
Āte āpples ānd bānānās

The song continues with each successive long vowel sound and ends by singing the verse again with the correct pronunciation of the lyrics.

I had no idea how to interpret a song that was almost entirely based on sounds in a way that would be accessible to children who had never heard a spoken language. I remember being horrified, because all I could think to do was repeatedly sign the lyrics in their original form, without the phonetic variations. In spite of my incompetence, the Deaf students laughed and had a good time, and they happily copied my signs as the other children sang along. All of the children and staff were smiling and laughing, while I tried to keep breathing until the torture stopped.

The second challenge came when I realized that Roberto, and a few of his classmates, were recent immigrants from Mexico. Like many Deaf children in Mexico, he had not had formal schooling through any form of signed language. According to staff members who had worked with him on occasion, he had no formal language skills. He could not speak or lipread Spanish or English. He could not read or write. He did not use either Mexican or American Sign Language. He could not fingerspell or write his own name independently.

When I was assigned to Roberto's group, I learned a lot about sign language, and a whole lot more about learning. In retrospect, I recognize that I was completely ineffective in meeting Roberto's language needs. He was an easygoing kid, and we all had a great time that week. Roberto smiled just as much as the rest of us. From his reaction, an observer might not have realized just how often he was left out. There were two things working in his favor: He and his classmates had developed their own means of communicating; and most of the experiences were highly visual and interactive, so he was able to enjoy the daily activities even if he didn't fully understand what a particular lesson was about.

At the end of the week, I learned my own great lesson from Roberto. Sometimes the most effective communication does not rely on formal vocabulary. Earlier in the day, we had gone to an old stable that was still in operation. He loved seeing the horses, and we spent a long time there before moving on to the next activity. When we got back to the main classroom at the end of the day, Roberto ran up to an interpreter who was on staff at his regular school and went into an elaborate representation of what he had seen. Roberto became the horse, mimicking head movements and eating hay so vividly that he re-created the scene for those who had not been there. Although he did not use any formal signs, neither from ASL nor from Mexican Sign Language, his message was clear to signers and nonsigners alike.

During my own interpreting education, I had learned that I should assess the students' language needs, but my understanding was that we would need to decide whether to interpret or transliterate. I did not recall any mention of assessment of language needs beyond that, especially in a school setting. However, when I was out in the field, I found myself wondering how to interpret effectively for these students with such diverse linguistic needs. At the end of the day, all of the groups reconvened in one room to recap the day's events before they boarded the buses that returned them to their respective schools. During this time, all of the interpreters and students gathered in one large room, so we took turns interpreting for the whole group. From my perspective, one of the interpreters made the information so visually clear that I made a vow to emulate her approach when interpreting with Deaf elementary school students or others who had not yet developed solid language proficiencies.

Several years later, when Roberto was in middle school, I saw him again. This time, he was using ASL to describe an occurrence that had taken place at school. I couldn't help but be amazed by the development of his sign language skills, even though nobody in his family used sign language. He had acquired at least some level of language competency through exposure to sign language at school. Deaf students like Roberto and other students from cultural and linguistic backgrounds that differ from the dominant language of a society often struggle in academic environments, both with school discourse (Heath, 1983) and with cultural identity and self-esteem (Cummins, 2001). If it is true that even Deaf children who were severely language deprived during the critical years of language acquisition may still be able to acquire communicative competency when exposed to sign language as late as fourth or fifth grade, we cannot overlook the impact interpreters have on the school experiences of mainstreamed Deaf and hard of hearing children.

Because the literature confirmed my own observations and experience that interpreters were not well prepared for interpreting in K–12 settings, I wanted to explore the ways in which K–12 interpreters might facilitate or hinder optimal learning and social opportunities for mainstreamed Deaf and hard of hearing children. Furthermore, I wanted more information than I could find in the literature about the skills and knowledge that educational interpreters need to do their jobs effectively. I set out to learn more about Deaf education and interpreting in K–12 settings so that I could do a better job of preparing students for employment.