

Sign Language Interpreting in the Classroom

Adapted from the Department of Disability Services
at Columbus State Community College and Alexa Murray

Introduction

Students who are deaf or hard of hearing often require classroom accommodations so they can understand and learn the material presented. Some individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing prefer communicating through sign language as opposed to writing, lip reading, or if the individual possesses residual hearing, possibly using a device to amplify sounds.

When sign language is the preferred form of communication, the services of a sign language interpreter may be arranged for the student as a reasonable and useful classroom accommodation to help the student learn and understand course content. Therefore, it is important for both students who are deaf or hard of hearing and instructors who teach these students to know how to utilize the services of an interpreter effectively.

Effective use of interpreting services requires an accurate understanding of the interpreter's role and responsibilities as well as your own role and responsibilities as instructor when an interpreter is present in your classroom. Listed below is a brief definition of the interpreter's job, followed by suggested guidelines that can help make the teaching process go smoothly for you, the interpreter, and most importantly, for the student. For more information on interpreting in the classroom or on teaching students who are deaf or hard of hearing, please contact your institution's Disability Support Services office (DSS).

Description

A sign language interpreter is a trained professional who facilitates communication and conveys all auditory and signed information so that both hearing and deaf individuals may fully interact.

The interpreter is bound by a code of ethics, which includes keeping all material interpreted strictly confidential. In addition, interpreters are to maintain the integrity of the message, always conveying the content and spirit of the speaker. The interpreter's mission is to facilitate communication; he/she should neither add nor delete any information at any time. Because of the specific nature of the interpreter's role, it is important not to ask the interpreter for his/her opinion or to perform any tasks other than interpreting.

It is also important to keep in mind that sometimes, depending on the length of the class, more than one interpreter will be present. Typically, any class over two hours requires the services of two interpreters who will take turns interpreting, usually at 20-minute intervals.

Guidelines:

Helpful Hints to Remember Before Using Interpreting Services:

- **Acknowledge Interpreter's Role.** Remember that the interpreter is in the classroom to facilitate communication for both the student and instructor. As mentioned above, he/she should not be asked to run errands, proctor exams, or discuss the student's personal issues. He/she should not participate in the class in any way independent of the student or express personal opinions.
- **Use Captioned Materials. Captioned films or videotapes are strongly recommended** to allow the student direct visual access to the information. However, if you are planning to show a movie or use other audiovisual materials without captioning, inform the Disability Services **before hand** so that we may assist you in providing access to the material on the video.
- **Establish Interpreter's Location.** When a student uses a sign language interpreter, the interpreter and student will discuss where the interpreter should be located in the classroom to provide the greatest benefit for the student while minimally distracting other class members. Keep lines of sight free for visual access to information. In class, the interpreter will attempt to position himself/herself so the student who is deaf or hard of hearing can see both the instructor and any visual aids.
- **Consider Classroom Arrangement.** For interactive situations, circles or semi-circles work best for students who are deaf or hard of hearing. Group work will be most effective when the groups consist of 3 or four members and the members talk or sign in turn. For lab work, the interpreter may need to move around the room with the student to maintain lines of sight.
- **Share Lecture Content.** Familiarity with the subject matter will enhance the quality of the interpreted message. If possible, meet with the interpreter to share outlines, texts, agenda, technical vocabulary, class syllabus, and any other background information that would be pertinent.
- **Consider Testing Arrangements.** Alternative test procedures may be needed by some students. If a test has a written format (essay, multiple choice, or fill-in-the-blank), the student may prefer to have the interpreter read and translate questions into sign language. Arrangements for this kind of testing should be made by the student and instructor before the student takes the test. Additionally, the interpreter may need extra time to prepare for the reading and interpreting of test questions. If you need assistance in providing testing accommodations, you and the student may arrange to have the test proctored by

Disability Services. (Visit www.meredith.edu/students/counsel/disability/policies and click on “Test Proctoring” for more information.)

- Be Available for Clarification. Due to notetaking difficulty as well as the potential for interpreter absence, the student may need to meet with you outside of class to clarify the content of the course or lectures.

Helpful Hints to Remember While Using Interpreting Services:

- Speak Directly to the Student. Because the interpreter is in the classroom to facilitate communication for both the student and instructor, speak directly to and maintain communication with the student. The interpreter may request clarification from you and/or the student to ensure accuracy of the information conveyed.
- Spell Out Technical Words. It is helpful to have technical terms or jargon relating to a particular discipline or concept to be spelled or written out, either on the chalkboard, an overhead projector, a class handout, or with some other visual aid. It may also be necessary and appropriate to provide the interpreter with a copy of the text book so that she/he may become familiar with technical terms used in class.
- Speak at a Reasonable Pace. Interpreters normally interpret with a time lag of one or two sentences after the speaker because interpreters must first process the information before relaying it. Speak naturally at a modest pace, keeping in mind that the interpreter must listen and understand a complete thought before signing it.
- Use “I” and “You” References. The interpreter will relay your exact words. Use personal references such as “I” and “You” when communicating with individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing. Avoid speaking of the individual in the third person; phrases such as “ask her” or “tell him” can be confusing.
- Encourage Communicating in Turn. It is important that only one person speak or sign at a time. The interpreting process only allows one person to communicate at a time. Therefore, encourage students to wait before speaking or signing until you recognize them.
- Allow Ample Time for Reading. The student cannot read and watch the interpreter at the same time. Avoid talking while students are focused on written work or overhead projections/multimedia presentations.
- Recognize the Need for a Notetaker. It is difficult to take good notes while lip reading or watching a sign language interpreter. Therefore, a notetaker to assist the student who is deaf or hard of hearing may be both a helpful and reasonable accommodation in these instances. If a notetaker is not available for the course, it may be reasonable for you to

offer a copy of your lecture notes to the student as well as an opportunity for the student to meet with you to clarify the lecture.

- **Allow Ample Time for Questions.** During class discussions or question/answer periods, give the student an opportunity to raise his/her hand, be recognized, and ask questions through the interpreter. Making time for questions allows the interpreter to finish interpreting for the current speaker and enables the student who is deaf or hard of hearing to participate in class.
- **Repeat or Paraphrase Questions and Responses.** When questions are asked, be sure to repeat or paraphrase questions before a response is given. Likewise, responses should also be repeated or paraphrased.
- **Incorporate Strategic Lecture Breaks.** Plan periodic breaks so that both student and interpreter can get a rest from the rigors of interpreting. For the student, receiving information visually without breaks can be tiring and cause eye fatigue. For the interpreter, relaying information to the student while simultaneously processing new information from the speaker can create mental and physical strain. For classes longer than 50 minutes in which only one interpreter is available, a 5-10 minute mid-class break is essential.
- **Provide Advanced Notice of Additional Assignments.** When assignments that require an interpreter are assigned, provide at least 5 business days' notice to allow the student time to request an interpreter. Field trips, convocations, presentations, etc., may all require an interpreter to allow the student access to the information presented.

Other Pointers for Effective Teaching

- **Expectations.** Although many students with disabilities need accommodations, expect these students to perform at a level commensurate with their peers. Do not have a special grading scale or other criteria for them. Do not drastically alter or water-down your curricula for that individual.
- **Universal Design for Learning.** “Universal design is an approach to designing course instruction, materials, and content to benefit people of all learning styles without adaptation or retrofitting.” (Visit <http://www.osu.edu/grants/dpg/fastfact/undesign.html> for more information.) By incorporating Universal Design principles in instruction that allow students with disabilities access to the classroom, you may also be designing instruction that works better for everyone in the class. Classes designed with this concept in mind offer a variety of methods of content presentation, flexible teaching strategies, and options for demonstrating mastery of course content.
- **Guided Notes on the Web.** Providing students with guided notes that they can access through the Web prior to class assists them with focusing on the appropriate material. It will help them to learn more effectively in the classroom as well as take better notes. (Visit <http://www.osu.edu/grants/dpg/fastfact/notes.html> for more information).

- Collaboration. Don't hesitate to call your Disability Support Services office (DSS) to arrange for a three-way meeting between you, a disability services counselor, and the student to work out any issues and to collaborate on the best instructional strategies for the student. (Visit <http://www.meredith.edu/student/counsel/disability>).

References:

Material adapted from:

Darroch, Kathy & Marshall, Liza. National Technical Institute for the Deaf, Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT). (1998) Northeast Technical Assistance Center Teacher Tip Sheet, "Interpreting." Publication developed through a grant from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) and produced through a cooperative agreement between RIT and OSERS (H078A60004).

Office for Disability Services, Ohio State University. (2001). Instructor Handbook: Teaching Students with Disabilities. Available on-line at: <http://www.ods.ohio-state.edu>

The Ohio State University Partnership Grant, Fast Facts for Faculty Series: Teaching Students with Sensory Impairments. Available on-line at <http://www.osu.edu/grants/dpg/fastfact/sensory.html>

Additional Resources:

The Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST), <http://www.cast.org>
"CAST is a not-for-profit organization that uses technology to expand opportunities for all people, especially those with disabilities." Site offers information on Universal Design for Learning and the National Center on Assessing the General Curriculum.

Gallaudet University, <http://www.gallaudet.edu>
"Gallaudet University, located in Washington DC, is the only liberal arts university in the world designed exclusively for deaf and hard of hearing students." Site offers information on the campus, academic programs, and latest research.

The National Association of the Deaf (NAD), <http://www.nad.org>
"The NAD, established in 1880, is the oldest and largest constituency organization safeguarding the accessibility and civil rights of 28 million deaf and hard of hearing Americans in education, employment, health care, and telecommunications." Site offers information regarding issues related to deafness including "information on deaf people, sign language, and legal rights."

The National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID), <http://ntidweb.rit.edu/>

“NTID, one of eight colleges of the Rochester Institute of Technology, is the world’s first and largest technological college for students who are deaf and hard of hearing.” Site offers information on the campus, academic programs, and latest research.

The Northeast Technical Assistance Center (NETAC), <http://www.netac.rit.edu>

“NETAC provides outreach and technical assistance to postsecondary programs in the Northeast serving individuals who are deaf and hard of hearing.” Site offers information regarding issues and special topics related to postsecondary students who are deaf or hard of hearing, interagency agreements associated with 1998 amendments to Section 504 of the Rehab Act of 1973, and tips for students on how to finance their education.

Ohio Rehabilitation Services Commission (RSC), <http://www.state.oh.us/rsc/index2.asp>

“The RSC is the state agency responsible for vocational rehabilitation services for Ohioans with physical and mental disabilities.” Site offers information regarding publications and videos, frequently asked questions and answers, and consumer advisory topics.

The Ohio State University Partnership Grant, Fast Facts for Faculty Series,
<http://www.osu.edu/grants/dpg/fastfact/index.html>

Site offers a selection of quick reference guides for teaching students with disabilities that are available for downloading in Word, PDF, and HTML formats.

Additional Resources:

The Postsecondary Education Programs Network (PEPNET), <http://www.pepnet.org>

“PEPNET is the national collaboration of the four Regional Postsecondary Education Centers for Individuals who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing. The goal of PEPNet is to assist postsecondary institutions across the nation to attract and effectively serve individuals who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing.” Site offers information regarding the four Regional Centers, current news and events, a listserv to ask questions and share experiences, and online training for education professionals.

The Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID), <http://www.rid.org>

“RID is a national membership organization of professionals who provide sign language interpreting/transliterating services for Deaf and Hard of Hearing persons.” Site offers information regarding interpreting including hiring/working with an interpreter, and interpreting standards.

The United States Department of Justice, Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) homepage, <http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/ada/adahom1.htm>

Site includes information regarding disability rights and laws, ADA questions and answers, and a list of ADA publications.