

# Sign Language Interpreters in the Classroom

Prior to reading this information it is recommended to first read *Sign Language Interpreters: An Introduction* and *Interpreters as a Reasonable Accommodation for Testing*.

## Overview

While visual language interpreters have gained more prominence and visibility in the classroom as a result of the passage of the American with Disabilities Act in 1990, they have been a part of the educational landscape since the early 1970s. Despite longevity in the classroom, the role and function of the interpreter is often confusing and distracting.

## What is the role of the interpreter in the classroom?

Simply stated, the role of the interpreter in the classroom is to faithfully convey the spirit and content of the communication occurring in the classroom. Interpreters are not teacher's aides nor assistants. Unless specifically arranged, interpreters do not serve as tutors and are not responsible for the student's attendance and classroom effort.

The interpreter's job does not start and end in the classroom. The interpreter must become familiar with the course content that will be discussed—a task that may involve additional research on topic-related words and phrases—and the signs needed to convey them.<sup>1</sup>

A good ASL interpreter does not start interpreting immediately after a person begins communicating; rather they take time to cognitively process the content and message being delivered. Consequently, interpreters follow at a pace approximately one or two sentences behind the person who is actively communicating. This is true whether the communicator is deaf or hearing.

## What should I do if my student is performing poorly in the classroom?

While a lack of student effort and poor performance may appear to be linked to student apathy, it may also be a byproduct of ineffective interpreting. Interpreters have a professional and ethical obligation to inform the instructor, the student and, when available, the disability services office when they believe effective communication is not occurring. Never assume poor performance is student apathy, nor an inability of the student to learn. Conversely, never assume that poor performance is an ineffective interpreter. It may be one or the other, both, or a host of other factors. As an instructor, it is your obligation to check in with the student to ascertain if their communication needs are being met.

Deaf students often miss information in class lectures, and do not acquire as much information from lectures as their hearing peers, even when appropriate accommodations are provided.<sup>2</sup>

## What can I do to make the class rewarding for the student and manageable for the interpreter?

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There are a number of strategies you can employ, many of which will benefit your hearing students as well.

- **Share course materials and teaching aids:** If possible, meet with the interpreter prior to the first class to share the class syllabus, textbook, handouts, PowerPoint presentations, etc.
- **Online access to updates:** Include the interpreter on your email and online discussion group rosters.
- **Choosing a good sight line:** Allow the student and the interpreter to choose the seat that provides the best visual vantage point.
- **Speak at natural or reasonable pace:** Too slow of a pace is as difficult to interpret as too fast of a pace.
- **Build in time for PowerPoint presentations:** The visual learner cannot watch the interpreter and look at a PowerPoint at the same time. After introducing the PowerPoint, allow time for the student to obtain the information conveyed and then focus on the screen.
- **Refrain from talking during written class work:** For all of the same reasons described above.
- **Have all videos/films captioned:** Many new videos/films are already captioned. Nevertheless, always check to make sure: 1) they are indeed captioned; and 2) you know how to turn on captions should the media be “closed captioned.”
- **Know how to orchestrate an interpreter and student-friendly class discussion:** Always ask all students to raise their hands and be recognized before speaking. Wait until the interpreter has finished interpreting the entire chunk of information (i.e., a discussion question), so that the student has time to process the chunk of information and raise their hand to participate in the discussion. Remember, the interpreter is usually one to two sentences behind the speaker. There is nothing more frustrating for a deaf student than not being able to participate in class because the instructor is moving too quickly to acknowledge someone else’s raised hand.
- **Plan breaks:** Visual learning is physically challenging and can cause eye fatigue. The task of interpreting is cognitively and physically challenging. The allowance of breaks is especially important when there is only one interpreter.
- **Talk in the first-person:** When talking to your student, look directly at the student, and not at the interpreter. Use “I” and “you” rather than such third- person statements as “ask her” or “tell him.” Using this simple communication strategy will strengthen your instructor/student relationship.

While deaf students bring unique communication requirements to the classroom, ultimately they are simply students. Your student may be an overachiever, an academic slacker, or possess any shade of ability and motivation in between. What is important is to determine who your student is and what they can offer to the class, and then create a teaching environment that allows them equal opportunity to shine.

## Additional Resources

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- Sign Language Interpreters: An Introduction:  
[www.nationaldeafcenter.org/introsli](http://www.nationaldeafcenter.org/introsli)
- Hiring Qualified Sign Language Interpreters:  
[www.nationaldeafcenter.org/hiringsli](http://www.nationaldeafcenter.org/hiringsli)
- Dual Accommodations: Interpreters and Speech-to-Text Services:  
[www.nationaldeafcenter.org/dualservices](http://www.nationaldeafcenter.org/dualservices)
- Interpreters as Reasonable Accommodation for Testing:  
[www.nationaldeafcenter.org/interpreterstesting](http://www.nationaldeafcenter.org/interpreterstesting)

Additional resources on this subject may be available at [www.NationalDeafCenter.org](http://www.NationalDeafCenter.org).

## References

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- <sup>1</sup> "Professional Sign Language Interpreting." Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, Standard Practice Papers. Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, Inc., 2007. Web.  
[www.tinyurl.com/interpretingSPP](http://www.tinyurl.com/interpretingSPP)
- <sup>2</sup> Marschark, M. "Access to Postsecondary Education through Sign Language Interpreting." Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education (2005): 38-50. Web.  
<http://jdsde.oxfordjournals.org/content/10/1/38.full.pdf>

