Providing an education through interpreting has been promoted as one solution in the education of deaf children. However, there are many barriers to accessibility in an interpreted education, including inadequate interpreting, students who do not have sufficient skills in English or American Sign Language to benefit from interpreting, and goals in academics and social relations that cannot be achieved via interpreting. In addition, interpreter training programs are still not adequately serving the educational interpreting community and do not often include courses and training about educational interpreting. Deaf students still enter the school system with woefully inadequate language skills. Yet many people continue to believe that an interpreted education is somehow equal to a direct education, that socialization through an interpreter is normal, and that interpreters are adequate language models for deaf children (Johnson, 1999; Johnson & Cohen, 1994; Jones, 1993; Ramsey, 1994; Schick, Williams, & Bolster, 1999).

The educational barriers are mighty, but in the classroom they can be minimized. Teachers, interpreters, and parents can make a difference. We can work together so that the visual accessibility of each classroom is analyzed when we make a decision about the appropriateness of a student’s placement (Winston, 1994, 1990). Further, when a mainstream classroom is chosen as the instructional environment, we can work to analyze the events in the interpreted classroom to assure that it remains as accessible to the deaf child as possible.

**Interpreting Visual Access**

Unfortunately, many believe that once the interpreter is in front of the classroom, access for the deaf student is automatic. In this myth, people believe that interpreting alone makes the transactions in the classroom accessible. Teachers continue to teach, pretending or assuming that the deaf student is accessing everything that the hearing students are accessing. But effective access, and with it successful interpreted education, does in fact require a great deal of additional adapting.

*Photography By John T. Consoli*
Interpreting should not be seen as the solution to classroom access; it should be seen simply as an educational tool. Deaf students, teachers, and others must be able to use this tool effectively for deaf students to learn. It is important to clarify that this concept of “tool” applies to interpreting and the interpreting process—not to interpreters. Interpreters are not tools—even though they are sometimes treated like owned objects by students and teachers. They are essential to the successful implementation of the educational tool of interpreting.

The other key is the classroom teacher. Interpreting provides a means for the teacher to accomplish the goal of teaching the deaf students in his or her classroom. Unfortunately, in many mainstreamed classrooms, teachers give up their responsibility for deaf students, believing that the interpreter is taking over and doing the job. And, often, deaf students give up on learning from the teacher, expecting the interpreter to teach instead. But when we remember that interpreting is a tool, we see that this should not be the case and we are forced to consider other profound implications.

We are forced to remember that deaf children are still deaf. We must accept that their educational needs remain those of deaf students and not of hearing students.

We understand that, as deaf students, they need to have visual accessibility. All activities must be visually accessible to deaf students in order for them to have the same opportunity to learn as their hearing peers.

We accept that interpreting cannot provide visual accessibility to all educational activities. Perhaps it is this last item that is the most difficult to understand and accept.

The Uninterpretable Lessons

Most people do not immediately understand how some situations cannot be interpreted. In fact, uninterpretable activities occur routinely. They occur every time lessons and information are presented simultaneously to the eyes and ears.

During these simultaneous auditory/visual presentations, we readily understand and even anticipate that deaf students glean access to the auditory information through the interpreting. What we less readily understand is that the same interpreting that provides accessibility to the auditory information blocks accessibility to the visual information (Winston, 1994).

Presentations or lessons that have simultaneous auditory and visual components are ordinary events in classes where most of the children hear. Here are a few of the many hundreds of activities that occur every day:

• Students watch educational videos, including those great PBS shows on wildlife, where animals go about their lives while a narrator explains their actions, and renditions of the plays of Shakespeare, with rich language and extraordinarily dense dialogue.

• The teacher writes a problem or lesson on the board while verbally issuing instructions on how to do it.

• The teacher or students demonstrate an experiment while describing it.

• The teacher instructs students to look at a handout, diagram, or picture while explaining what it means.

Such presentations are not only natural, but for most students they constitute effective teaching. The teacher is encouraging student learning by appealing to their senses, especially those of sight, sound, and touch.

Most hearing students can integrate auditory and visual information simultaneously most of the time. But the situation is vastly different for deaf students. In all of the routine events described above, deaf students cannot attend to the central learning event because it is visual and proceeding simultaneously with the signing of the interpreter. The eyes can only receive one set of stimuli at a time, and they are fastened on the signing. Lost are the scenery and action of the movie, the content of the writing as it unfolds across the blackboard, the specifics of a diagram on the paper that is in the deaf student’s hands. Intent on watching the interpreter, deaf students cannot receive the other visual content of the lesson. In cases such as these, interpreting actually creates a barrier to the deaf student’s visual access. Offered as a tool to facilitate the absorption of information in the classroom, interpreting blocks it.

Determining Visual Accessibility

The Interpreter’s Role

Interpreters are too often in part responsible for the myth that we are the solution to adapting the classroom for a deaf child. We walk into a setting and say to the teacher, “You just go ahead and talk and I will sign what you say. And when the deaf student signs, I will say whatever she signs.” This encourages the teachers to believe no other accommodations are needed and it perpetuates the difficulties of providing access for deaf students in the educational system (Roy, 2000; Wadensjo, 1998). Some interpreters demand complete and full attention to their own interpreting. In extreme cases, they refuse to wait until the deaf student has time to look before interpreting or they fail to indicate where the visual attention of the other students is.

On the other hand, sometimes interpreters try to ameliorate conditions for the deaf child without telling anyone they are doing so. This puts interpreters in the position of enabling a troubled system to continue. From the perspective of outsiders, it looks like the deaf child is being provided access to
information and is effectively incorporated into a hearing classroom; in fact, the interpreter is teaching, tutoring, and deciding what information is and is not important to the student. This strategy takes away the teacher's control of the classroom and detracts from the education of the deaf student.

One major professional duty of educational interpreters is to educate the teacher and students about the interpretability of certain situations. If teachers are aware of the inaccessibility, they can choose to adapt the classroom in ways that would facilitate visual accessibility. A determination about a classroom's interpretability and visual accessibility is not a reflection of the skill of the teacher or the interpreter. The best teachers and the most exciting classrooms may prove to be totally incompatible with interpreting and visual accessibility. When this occurs, interpreter skills are irrelevant—the child will not have complete access to the information emanating from the classroom.

The expertise of interpreters lies in evaluating whether the style of the teacher and the lesson are compatible with interpreting and to what degree teacher and lesson allow the deaf student visual access. When an activity requires a hearing student to use both ears and eyes at the same time, the interpreter has the professional duty of telling the teacher that the activity is not compatible with interpreting.

Once interpreters have helped teachers analyze their classroom activities or lesson plan for visual accessibility, the interpreter can join the teacher and other professionals in making decisions about modifying or changing the activities to make them compatible. In some cases, this may mean choosing a different classroom for the mainstreaming placement. In other cases, it may mean modifying an activity so that it permits visual access. In still other cases, the activities might remain the same and the interpreter would modify the interpreting to support the goal of the activity or lesson. It is only possible to do this, however, if the interpreter knows what the educational goal is. Once the interpreter knows the goal, he or she must analyze the interpreting modifications and inform the teacher and the student about the parts of the teaching that the student must by necessity miss as interpreting focuses around the educational goal.

**Effective Interpreted Education**

**It's Up to Us**

Most deaf adults know how interpreting situations are supposed to work and have a chance to manage them, either by stopping the interaction or by asking for a different type of input. Children accept what adults tell them. It is up to the professionals around them to use the interpreting tool wisely and effectively.

While there are many barriers to providing the visual accessibility necessary for an adequate interpreted education, it is possible to facilitate visual accessibility within the classroom itself. To do this, it is necessary for the interpreters and professionals to analyze the lessons, activities, and goals of the hearing classroom and adapt them to the visual needs of deaf students. Teachers, parents, and students need to weigh the advantages and disadvantages, the gains and losses of choosing an interpreted education. And once it is chosen, they need to continually assess the accessibility of the student's educational program. With appropriate classroom adaptation, an interpreted education can be effective. Without it, even the most accomplished deaf student, with the best language and academic preparation and the most skilled interpreter, will be denied access to a large portion of the learning experience.

The inaccessibility and interpretability of many classroom activities is an enormous problem. The deaf students cannot avoid it, and neither should we.

### References and Recommended Readings


