

Language Myths of an Interpreted Education

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Myth No. 1: Interpretations are adequate and appropriate models for the acquisition of any language

A basic tenet of language acquisition is that children must have interactive access to direct language in daily use in order to acquire it. Interpreting in the K-12 classroom is not an interactive process. Neither the interpreter nor the deaf student has the freedom to play, practice, and independently impact the teacher's language during an interpretation. It is most often the teacher in K-12 who initiates and controls the interactions, while using an intermediary to fill in the language. Instead of gradually acquiring language and interaction skills as most language users do, from prolonged interaction with native users, deaf children are placed in front of moving hands without the benefit of interaction. They are expected, by staring at these moving hands, to somehow decipher the meaning and internalise the structure and communication requirements of a language from watching an interpretation. I offer the following example to paint some slight sense of the absurdity of this expectation.

Imagine yourself, an accomplished adult, in this scenario: you are sent to Japan to learn an essential knowledge and skill set so that you can return to your place of employment and teach them to your colleagues. Unless you are successful you will lose your employment and lifestyle, and possibly your self-respect. When you arrive, your classes are being taught in spoken Japanese. The interpreter you have been provided appears to be doing an admirable job interpreting-unfortunately it is into Japanese Sign Language, a language you do not know. Further, you are required to take written tests, and present essays in Japanese, using their script rather than a writing system you know. Imagine, if you will, your frustration at being encouraged to write Japanese script by imagining what the character must look like. Imagine that the instructions are coming to you in either spoken or Japanese Sign Language, neither of which you understand.

After describing this scenario, I pose this question to parents, educators, administrators and interpreters: what would you do, as a competent adult, who is already knowledgeable and confident in one language, and in your own field of expertise, if you found yourself in this situation?

I get many responses-file a complaint with the organisers, get up and walk out, explain why you won't be able to succeed in either the content or the

language requirements. Never has anyone said that she would stay, suffer through the frustrations, the daily inability to understand, the daily failures on tests, assignments, and interactions, and return home knowing that their job, their lifestyle, their expectations were going to be drastically affected, if not lost.

Yet, this is what many deaf students must tolerate in interpreted settings on a daily basis. Without adequate language skills in either sign language or English, they are expected to master both, at the same time, while also learning content, and all, often, through a less than adequate interpreter. There are several differences between the deaf student and ourselves in the imagined scenario—we already have mastered at least one language, our native one; deaf children often haven't. (Monikowski, 2004; Stack, 2004; Schick, 2003).

We have already mastered some part of the content knowledge in our field; deaf children are often lacking in world and daily knowledge due to the limited language input they receive in hearing families. To also expect them to acquire new content while expecting them to learn signing and English is unreasonable

We have already developed a sense of self and self-esteem. We have experienced success in some parts of our world, and in some parts of school. Imagine the self-esteem you would have if every question directed at you was incomprehensible; if every time you tried to respond, the others in the class patiently waited to move on to someone who understood what was happening. (Ramsey, 1997, 2000, 2004).

I doubt that any of us would tolerate this situation for long, yet we continue to impose it on deaf students in interpreted educations. We must acknowledge that interpreting serves those who already have language, but is not an appropriate or effective approach for acquiring it. An interpreter is no more a "model" for language acquisition than the Japanese interpreter would have been for us in the scenario above. Deaf students must already have language before being placed in interpreted educations; interpreting does not provide this opportunity.

Myth No. 2: Transliterations, intended to reflect some form of English message reduplication, are adequate models for the acquisition of English

Transliteration is the term used most often in the US to describe signing that reflects some features of English. Despite studies showing that these systems do not adequately and completely represent spoken English (Schick, 2003; Stack, 2004, Wilbur, 2003) these systems are still required in

school systems to teach English. The instructions for these systems include directions to include aspects of American Sign Language to make the systems more visual. They also instruct users, and especially interpreters, to delete parts of English in order to keep up with spoken English. If we accept that these systems must include ASL, and that interpreters must condense and delete, then we cannot believe that they represent a model from which children can acquire English.

Transliterations do serve a purpose for many. As stated above, a person already fluent in English signing may benefit from and request a transliteration. Likewise, those who are already fluent in English, especially written English, are able to get a sense of English flavour by watching transliterations. Although pieces are missing, they are pieces that the fluent English watcher can fill in easily based on pre-existing knowledge. If the watcher does not have that pre-existing knowledge of English, like many deaf children placed in interpreted educations, they have nothing to fill in and have no way of knowing that they are missing parts and pieces.

In addition to the problems of learning English through transliterations, interpreted classrooms present complex expectations of English learning for hearing students. (Winston, 1990, 1994, 2004). In a very real sense, this is institutional audism as described by Turner (2002, and this conference)

Most mainstreamed courses are taught using spoken English, with support from written English, with the assumption that hearing students will learn not only the content of the lessons, but simultaneously learn the appropriate English terminology, phrasing, and “educated” style for speaking and writing about each subject in English. Hearing students are provided with double support for this—first they hear the spoken English, modelled for them by teachers who say things like, “That is called the electron. Put this down in your notes because you will see it on the test.” Hearing students learn early that this type of comment means they should be able to write this answer. In hearing the formal, academic English model spoken, often repeatedly, they learn to recognise the words, and frequently, they are able to figure out the English spelling of those words. When the spelling is especially important, or when a teacher believes that spelling may be problematic, she will often provide some kind of visual support as well.

This might occur by writing the word on the board, or by providing a list of key vocabulary. In these examples, the hearing students have both the style and the form of the academic English reinforced throughout a lesson. This results in strong reinforcement of the monolingual skills of English speakers and writers. The combination of the auditory input and the visual input further reinforce the monolingual focus on English, by taking advantage of two primary modes, hearing and sight.

Deaf students placed into such an environment in order to receive an interpreted or transliterated version of it are doubly disadvantaged. First, of course, the spoken English is simply not available to them. Each time a teacher emphasises the sound of a word by encouraging them to “Sound it out,” the deaf student is provided with a visual stimulus that has little relation to the sound. A hearing student, upon sounding out a word like “electron” is actually matching a series of sounds to a series of symbols, the letters of the alphabet. They have spent years of their lives matching these until they become automatic. Primary reading books have huge letters that children see while they listen to reading aloud, repeatedly, by parents, teachers, grandparents, babysitters, aunts and uncles. These readings provide them with the sound and help them accomplish the sound/symbol match. By the time they are in school, this process is so ingrained that most can hardly think of the sound /p/ without seeing the letter “p”. And few hearing people can look at a written letter like “d” and not hear the sound, even if only in their own heads.

This is not the case for deaf children. First and foremost, they are deaf. Although not a profound observation, it means that they do not hear the sound that their various care-givers produce. Some may have residual hearing that helps, and some may become talented speechreaders, recognising visual cues about how each letter is articulated. But they do not hear it. And each time that a caregiver relies on this approach, the deaf child is deprived of this basic reinforcement for the English language.

In addition, it is the custom for hearing people to speak the sound while simultaneously pointing to the letter in the book, or the word that starts with the sound/letter match. For example, while both the hearing care-giver and the hearing child look at the book, the care-giver speaks from behind or next to the child. The child sees the letter while hearing the pronunciation. “D”- look at all the things that start with the letter “d”! What is that a picture of? A Doll! A Dog! A Door! Daddy! Do you know other words that start with “d”? The essential matching of sound and letter is continued as the child becomes involved in thinking of other things she knows. This seems to be an effective approach for many hearing children.

For deaf children, it is impossible. This simple, long engrained practice of reading a story, of becoming literate in English, is inaccessible. In addition to not being able to hear the sounds, if they are looking at the book, they can’t even see the mouth and throat movements that might help them recognise it visually.

One solution to some of this is to have the deaf child facing the speaker. But then the simultaneous nature of the activity must be lost. First the child needs

to see the speech movements, then look at the book to see the word being pointed too. Of course, often the speaker, often unaware of the problem, has moved to pointing at another picture. The result is that the deaf child may see the movements of the word “doll” and look at the page to see a picture of a dog. Can the child use peripheral vision? Perhaps as they become accustomed to having to perform two sequential tasks (looking first at the mouth, then at the book) during the same amount of time that any hearing child has to do them simultaneously. Can the reader slow down, waiting for the child to look at first the speech and then the written word and picture? They can. But too often they don't. Hearing caregivers are not often cognisant of the true need to separate these processes into sequential events.

And, of course, there is the usually suggested solution to adding signing to the speech so that the deaf child can see the letters on the reader's hand, then look at the book. Again, does the reader truly separate the 2 events? And, more to the point, does the reader have the signing skills to add signing to their speech? Rarely! Often, only a single family member has the signing skills needed to comfortably and consistently add these signs. The parent who is struggling to think of the handshape for the letter “d” for example (Is that a d or an f???-where is my dictionary!!!!) is not able to consistently and naturally provide this input to the deaf child. Add to that the need to know THE SIGN for all those words—DOG, DOLL, DOOR, DAD (hmm, but that is the sign for FATHER—how can it be the same as DAD—those are two different English words!!! And then there is DOLLY??? DOGGY???)

And the fun, the excitement of reading is gone. What child will continue to attend to an activity where the adult is constantly struggling? And what adult will continue it? And how many other care-givers in the deaf child's life have given up the struggle long ago? The myriad opportunities that hearing children encounter effortlessly every day are lost to most deaf children.

We can learn valuable lessons from watching Deaf parents and teachers as they provide this same exposure to their children. First, they recognize that that they must provide the time for sequential presentations-first showing the sign representing each letter or word, if they are using English like-signing, or showing a sign with a similar meaning. Then, always cognizant of the deaf child's need to visually process, they direct the sightline to the picture or the written symbol. They nurture the visual needs of the deaf child, and do not forget, as we hearing people so often do, that sequential presentations are necessary. Not only will they sit in front of the child so that the child can see the hand from that perspective, they also sit behind the child, reaching their hands in front of the child. This provides a different perspective on the handshape, and can greatly reduce the time needed for the child to shift their gaze from the hand to the page. In fact, the child can see both the hand and

the page at the same time if they are close enough together. It is possible for deaf children to have the visual reinforcement between the hands and the page, if care-givers are skilled at performing those activities.

Deaf students who enter an educational system based on the assumption that they have been exposed to literacy in a hearing world enter an interpreted education with a deficit. They have not experienced the exposure to sound/symbol relationships, and for the great majority, they have not experienced natural, consistent and sufficient exposure to sight/symbol relationships, and they have often not developed the level of language skill in any language that their peers in the interpreted environment have achieved.

As teachers encourage students to sound out the words they need to spell, they raise insurmountable barriers to deaf children. While hearing children continue to practice what they have been learning all along, deaf children are not only further blocked from the sound input, but they are also denied adequate input through visual means.

Myth No. 3: Educational interpreters/transliterators can be expected to produce adequate language in any form;

We have, in the imagined scenario presented earlier, hopefully been assigned a competent interpreter. But study after study has clearly demonstrated that excellence in interpreting is not the norm, nor even the usual, in educational interpreting (Jones, 2004; Jones, Clark & Soltz, 1997; LaBue, 1995, 1998; Yarger, 2001). Although schools and states have begun to require standards for interpreting skills in education, the standard is woefully low. A typical standard requires, at best, a 3.5 on something like the Educational Interpreting Performance Assessment (EIPA) in one area—elementary, middle school or high, combined with a single sign signing style—ASL, English or PSE.

If we consider the rubrics describing the performance level of someone achieving a slightly higher score of 4.0, we see that educational interpreters "...at this level would be able to convey much of the classroom content, but may have difficulty with complex topics or rapid turn-taking. (Schick & Williams, 1998)

If we consider the rubrics describing a slightly lower performance score of 3.0, we see that an educational interpreter "...at this level would be able to communicate very basic classroom content, but may incorrectly interpret complex information resulting in a message that is not always clear. An interpreter at this level needs continued supervision, and should be required to participate in continuing education in interpreting." (Schick & Williams, 1998).

An interpreter scoring 3.5 would fall somewhere in between. Even given the descriptors for 4.0, is “much of the classroom content” enough? Would it be enough if your child’s education were at stake? If your education were at stake? What does “much” look like? About 80%?

I have added a simulation exercise at the end of this paper illustrate the effect of what "much" or 80% might look like.

To add insult to injury, it should be remembered as well that most states allow a grace period of as much as five years for an interpreter to achieve this minimal level of accomplishment, allowing them to work when they are unable to meet the minimal requirements. And once an interpreter achieves a required score in a single grade level in a single signing style (elementary school PSE, for example) they are not required to demonstrate achievement at a high school level using ASL, even though they may be assigned to high school with an native ASL signer.

Even with these increased standards becoming more widespread, the chances that a deaf student will have an interpretation that provides even 80% of the information are very low, and it begs the question of whether that “much” is close to being enough.

Myth No. 4: Deaf students who rely primarily on visual input have the language foundations to access and process the language of interpreters/transliterators.

In more than two decades of working in, observing, and analyzing educational interpreting, I have seen little research about this topic. Two recent volumes (Marschark, Peterson, and Winston, 2004; Winston 2004) deal with interpreted education, and the need for such research is clearly evident. There is research about language learning in general, Jamieson (2003) and Singleton and Supalla (2003) provide detailed reviews of various language testing approaches in use. Maller (2003) and Marschark (2003) provide a review of the approaches to cognitive testing and research about deaf people. None of the research reported, however, reflect attention to the language and cognitive needs for using interpretation in education. Schick (2004) provides a discussion of the cognitive and social aspects of deaf children in mainstream classrooms. However, there is nothing to guide administrators, teachers, parents and interpreters about what level of linguistic and cognitive competence a student must have in order to effectively access interpreted educations. There is no consensus about an age or level where interpreting might best begin, and no standards for guidance. Students are mainstreamed from pre-kindergarten. Can they

cognitively separate the “interpretation” from the “source”, the teacher from the interpreter?

More familiar to me and my research is the placement of deaf students into interpreted educations without any sense of their language abilities. Or rather, the sense is often that they have few language abilities, either in signing or in English.

This takes us full circle to the first and second myths, that deaf children can and will acquire language, and English, from watching an interpretation. Since they can't, at what level of language can they begin to take advantage of and understand interpreting, a process that adds to the cognitive load of understanding a message? My first experience with this was my second year as an educational interpreter, when I was interpreting for a fluent ASL signer in an academic class. In the middle of the academic year, a new student arrived at the school, and was placed in the same class. This student was a self-described oral failure. Raised to speech-read and speak, he had been doing poorly in school. The decision was made to place him in an interpreted setting so that he could learn sign language while continuing his education. Going back to the argument about Myth #1, he neither learned ASL from watching my hands for hours every day, nor did he suddenly improve his grades by sitting in an interpreted classroom. Further, since the school had decided that he was learning sign language by sitting in front of an interpretation, they offered no other opportunities for him to actually acquire signing through direct interaction. I have heard this story repeated ad infinitum and ad nauseum over the past two decades. Although decision-makers have no proof, no evidence that a deaf student has the adequate linguistic, cognitive or academic skills to benefit from an interpreted education, they place students in these settings assuming it will work for language acquisition. Given that it can't (Myths #1 & 2), given that standards for interpreting are so low (Myth #3), the assumption that deaf students are simply able to benefit from an interpreted education is completely unfounded. Another myth, not addressed in this paper, is that interpreters can somehow serve both an ASL signer and an English user at the same time. I have also seen no research on this topic, but as an interpreter I have never found it possible to sign ASL with one hand and English with the other. An additional factor yet to be considered is the interpretability of hearing classrooms. Discussions about this topic are few, and although research addresses at least some of these problems (La Bue, 1995, 1998; Marschark et al, 2005; Winston 2004), there are very few settings in which these factors are considered while placing students in various classes. The expectation that interpreters bridge this 400 foot chasm with a twenty foot rope seems to me to be ludicrous. Hopefully the calls for research that are emerging will lead to more information.

CONCLUSION

One final difference exists between ourselves and deaf children in interpreted education—we, in walking out of the setting, in filing a complaint, in choosing to act, are aware of our options and of the consequences, and most importantly, we have a choice. Deaf students, placed in interpreted educations, are too often placed there without choice—at least not their choice (Kurz/Langer, 2004). Someone thinks that sitting in front of hands flapping in the air will magically result in not only the acquisition of any language, but will actually result in the acquisition of a sound-based language like English.

Someone thinks that the indirect interpretations produced through the filter of even the best interpreter somehow equal the direct communication that occurs between a teacher and students who all speak the same language. Someone thinks that hands flapping in the air is a guarantee that those flappings have any meaning to anyone.

Each time a deaf child is placed in an interpreted environment for the purpose of education, those responsible need to de-bunk the myths that are rampant in mainstreaming and determine, without blinders, if the deaf student has the skills in two languages—English and sign language, if the student has adequate background knowledge to succeed in the content, if the student is able to handle the dual demands of a monolingual sound-based environment that is not intended to facilitate bilingual education, and if the usual simultaneous nature of most classrooms can be transformed to a sequential series of learning events to meet the learning needs of deaf students.

And, last, but certainly not least, if all else seems to be in place, those responsible for placing a deaf student in this educational environment must assure that the interpreter is competent to provide adequate access through interpreting, not at levels that leave out tremendous amounts of content and do not adequately represent either signing or English, but at levels that present the content clearly. Those who place deaf students in educational environments must ensure that no deaf student is left sitting through hours of hand flapping because of misconceptions about language acquisition, interpreter competence and the true accessibility of interpreted educations. They must make sure that institutional audism is addressed, not excused.

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Appendix I: Language Samples-80%

What follows is (#1) an excerpt from one acceptable interpretation of a presentation, and some renditions of what “much of the content” might look like in an interpretation (#2,3,4) of that presentation. If you had to listen to these examples spoken to you, which would you consider to be “much” of the content and which would you be able or willing to tolerate if your education, your future, depended on it?

1. Original Presentation: 2 interpretations

I'd like to show you one more, the last one,
and it's my favorite of his works.
I'd like to explain more about this work.
First, you see a music stand with the music book open,
and on the page there are no notes;
it's blank.
All of the musical notes have fallen off to the floor.

2. All the “words”, none of the prosody, pacing, and pausing of the original.

I'd like to show you one more the last one and it's my favorite of his works i'd like to explain more
about this work first you see a music stand with the music book open and on the page there are
no notes it's blank all of the musical notes have fallen off to the floor and then below you
see a picture with a bright blue sky and a human form below it a body that looks like death

3. If we assume that “Much” = 80%--of what? 80% of the sounds/letters

I'd like to ow you one re, the las ne,

and it's favorite of his work.
I'd like to explain more about this work.
First, you see a music stand with the music book open,
and on the page there are no notes;
it's blank.
All of the musical notes have fallen off to the floor.

4. Much = 80%--of words (two out of ten are missing)

I'd like to show you one more, the last one,
and it's my favorite of his works.
I'd explain more about this work.
First, you see stand with the music book open,
and on there are no notes;
it's blank.
All of notes have fallen off to the floor.

5. Much = just the subjects are missing

I'd like to show you one more, the last one,
and it's my favorite of his works.
I'd like to explain more about this work.
First, see a music stand with the music book open,
and on the page are no notes;
it's blank.
All of the have fallen off to the floor.

Although none of these provides the full sense of what is missing when “much” is interpreted, I offer them to provide some sense of the loss. For those who do not know sign or another language and have not experienced interpretations, these are intended to give a sense of what many deaf children must deal with minute by minute in the classroom.

In fact, even these examples are misleading, since in each case there is a pattern or logic behind the missing parts. In real interpretations, there may be no particular pattern, things are simply missing. One example of this is the tendency of many interpreters to delete repetition. I am told that some think that the time a teacher uses to just repeat an answer two or three times is seen as a time for the interpreter to rest or catch up. Although the teacher has a reason for repetition: reinforcing the importance of an answer, making sure that students hear it clearly, and the teacher understands that repetition is important, interpreters deliberately delete them for the deaf student. Instead of having clear discourse markers that map the main topics, the sub-topics, the asides and the jokes, the deaf student who does may get “much” of the message but few of the repetitions is being cheated of important and vital information.