

Sign Language Interpreting in Post-Secondary Foreign Language Classes

Introduction

Sign language interpreters working in post-secondary foreign language classes face the challenge of representing a spoken, second language through visual methods, incorporating the first language of Deaf students, ASL.

The use of American Sign Language (ASL) may lead to first language intrusion in the minds of Deaf and hard-of-hearing students participating in foreign language courses. Visual representations of a second language used during class may not directly map to what students are being tested on and asked to retain. The interpreter must bridge the boundaries of two, second languages and two different modalities (sight and audition). Participation by students may be constrained by the interpreter's fluidity in traversing these boundaries and the task of "retranslating" the communication mode used by the Deaf students into the foreign (target) language.

The author of this paper, a Senior Interpreter in the Department of Access Services at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf, one of nine colleges of Rochester Institute of Technology, participated in a Provost's Learning Innovation Grant (2010-2011). The author introduced and assessed, a sign-based interpreting system in support of Beginning and Intermediate Italian courses and concomitant study abroad programs that included Deaf and hard-of-hearing students. Follow up research was conducted to ascertain whether other individuals have engaged in similar processes. Findings indicate that early instruction of Deaf students learning French at the Paris School for the Deaf as well as current instruction of Russian Deaf students learning English offer parallel models of visual representations of a spoken language incorporating the 'natural' signed language of students.



Tense Markers



Infinitives



Adjectival Agreement



Diacritical Markers



Auxiliary Verbs



Verb Conjugation



LIS Incorporation

Interpreting for Deaf Students in Foreign Language Classes

The author of this paper, a Senior Interpreter in the Department of Access Services at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf, one of nine colleges of Rochester Institute of Technology, participated in a two-year Provost Learning grant to develop and assess best practices in the provision of interpreting in foreign language courses and study abroad programs.

The author's study focuses on:

1. What methods/best practices can be employed to lessen the intrusion of English-based sign systems and ASL?
2. How can Deaf students participate effectively in dialogic activities of the classroom?
3. What common strategies can be employed with Deaf and hard-of-hearing students who bring differing communication backgrounds and utilize a variety of communication methods?

Through years of self-assessment and modification of classroom interpreting work the author initiated an approach to sign language support which incorporates elements of American and Italian sign languages and creates a visual system to represent grammatical features of spoken Italian. Research has noted similarities of the author's system with that of the "methodical system" introduced by Abbe de l'Eppe in France in the 1700s, as well as current practices utilized in the field of bilingual education of the Deaf, such as the teaching of English in the Moscow Bilingual School for the Deaf.

Strategies Developed and Assessed by the Sign Language Interpreter

1. Study and incorporate Italian Sign Language (LIS) in classroom work of the interpreter. Initial fingerspelling was conducted in the alphabetic system of American Sign Language (ASL). As experience in LIS of both the interpreter and Deaf students progressed Italian fingerspelling was utilized at the intermediate language level.
2. Provide students with opportunities to "converse" in a variety of modes, use of a computer tablet, writing with hearing students, and use of the interpreter to vocalize via the signed system employed in class. (Mouthing of the Italian words by Deaf students and the interpreter accompanied this system following the syntactic structure of the Italian spoken language.)
3. Develop and incorporate a visual system to represent spoken Italian language to allow students to visually comprehend and apply grammatical and morphological components.

RIT Provost's Learning Innovations Grant – 2010-2011

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"Integrated Technology-based learning in foreign languages: Integration of interpreting, note taking, and online interaction to enhance hearing and deaf students communication skills in the target language."

Considering that foreign language is taught mainly in an immersion modality, [Professor D'Amanda] first tried to eliminate [sign language] interpreting in favor of note taking....Using a captionist would...eliminate ASL in the deaf supported environment so permitting an earnest immersion for the deaf just like with the hearing student.

With Access Services...even though captioning was providing the immersion style it was not accounting for the visual culture of the [D]eaf community, consequently shortchanging the deaf students of a full understanding of the subject.

Focus Groups of Foreign-Language Faculty & Students

A focus group of foreign-language faculty teaching in mainstreamed classes was conducted during January 2011. A common theme among faculty was the desire for orientation to working with Deaf students and interpreters, learning basic signs to connect with students, and learning methods of making accommodations to classroom methodologies that support access in the learning environment while not detracting from curricular goals.

A focus group of students in foreign language classes was conducted in January 2011 to gather further input on student preferences in working with sign language in foreign language classes. An interesting theme arose among students that ASL is often translated in the minds of students into English; the students then have to "translate" from English into the foreign language of study. This creates an unnecessary English language intrusion in their thought processes.



Faculty Focus Group



Student Focus Group

Learning Foreign Language: Then and Now

Charles-Michael, Abbe de l'Eppe established the first formal school for Deaf pupils in Paris, France following a chance meeting with two young Deaf parishioners. With no foreknowledge of previous attempts in educating Deaf students he strove to introduce the French language to his students. From his own observations, he determined, as later proponents of bilingual education would also do, that using the natural language of his pupils would open doors to learning in a second language. As stated by Marilyn Daniels in *Benedictine Roots in the Development of Deaf Education*, "he invented methodical signs designed to introduce the method or structure of French grammar into manual communication." (Daniels, 31)



Basic language skills should be developed....ability to understand the meaning of the words and their use in the language, accumulation of vocabulary, ability to construct grammatically correct utterances...
 There are many ways of introducing new words and phrases....sign from British sign language – the written form of the word – British fingerspelling. (Komarova, 87) (Teaching English to Deaf Children in the Moscow Bilingual School)

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