

SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETING IN AN ACADEMIC SETTING:  
PREPARATION STRATEGIES AND CONSIDERATIONS

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ABSTRACT

*This article discusses the work interpreters do in the run-up to academic interpreting assignments. Firstly, interpreters assess whether we are right for the job and whether the job is desirable to us. This necessarily includes whether interpreter requirements will be met in terms of working conditions, including payment, and occupational safety and health. Secondly, we pursue information on the content of an assignment and prepare ourselves in order to be able to interpret it satisfactorily. Finally, interpreters move to make the setting ready. This includes preparing the physical environment as well as preparing the people who will be working with us. I describe how lecturers and tutors can be involved in maximising the benefit of an interpreter working in their classroom.*

INTRODUCTION

When sign language interpreters are required in an academic setting, it is not a case of turning up on the day and signing a discrete sign for each word that is spoken and vice versa. We process a message in the same way that spoken language interpreters do – disrobing it of its original language and fitting it out in a new language suitable for the intended audience. Simultaneously we maintain the accuracy and intent of the person who uttered it. New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL), like other native signed languages, does not comply with the grammatical rules of the spoken language of its country. It is a language in its own right. For example, if a speaker in an architecture lecture said, ‘Structures like this might vary from 70m<sup>2</sup> to 170m<sup>2</sup>...’, it might be interpreted<sup>1</sup> as, ‘BUILDING LIKE IX ‘*building*’ CAN-BE FROM DCL ‘*range*’ 70 SQUARE METRE ‘*space*’ TO 170 SQUARE METRE.’ In order to be grammatically correct it is more important that the signs are positioned correctly in the signing space than articulated in a specific order (McKee 2002).

Interpreters must consider three broad categories in attempting to deliver an adequate rendition of all that they see and hear at an assignment. Firstly, we consider our skills and their fit to the job, such as any prior knowledge of the subject area, the ability to deal with the subject impartially, and the physical demands of the assignment. In some instances the result of this is an immediate refusal of the job. If not, we then turn to the material to be covered. Simultaneous interpreting requires a sentence by sentence interpretation in real time. Our brains listen to and hold one chunk of the message while, at the same time, they translate another chunk and deliver yet another chunk in front of clients. Prior knowledge of difficult material can take this task from arduous to manageable, or even impossible to easy. Going into a job without receiving any preparation or having any idea of the content puts me on the back foot. I feel worried that something will come up which will be beyond my comprehension or life-experience, and this psychological stress adds to the physical burden of the job. I might also feel tense about the possible humiliation of being unable to function in front of an audience. Sometimes I feel frustration and aggravation at the injustice of being unable to meet the needs of a client through the sheer ignorance or indifference of my academic colleagues. Thirdly, the physical and social setting must be prepared. Without adequate hospitality, giving equivalent access to information to Deaf people can be hindered if not completely thwarted. Interpreters and our contemporaries are all responsible for ensuring that the process works from beginning to end.

I have written this article from the perspective of an experienced interpreter who assumes that good preparation for interpreting allows a better experience for both Deaf and hearing clients. I do not attempt to give an exhaustive summary of Deaf perspectives on reasonable accommodation for Deaf people in academic settings. Such a description would be inappropriate and presumptuous from me as a hearing person. This discussion encompasses the process of engaging in an academic interpreting assignment. It covers both ideal scenarios and the difficulties encountered when we are placed between communities and furnished with a code of ethics that, among other things, prescribes impartiality.<sup>2</sup>

Johnson (1992), from her perspective as a Deaf student, gives a fascinating examination of how miscommunication happens when using interpreters in an academic context. She finds (1992:125) that the most prominent reasons for misunderstandings are ‘interpreting diagrams and verbal descriptions, and the problem of visual shifting’. She describes how problems of interpreting and of the hearing classroom environment impact on the Deaf student’s per-

ception of who is at fault. The causes of miscommunication and possible ways for reducing them are the responsibilities of all participants in the interaction (Johnson 2002; Harrington 2000). Sameshima (1999) writes about Deaf students in New Zealand and their perspectives on studying in mainstream polytechnics and universities. She takes a holistic look at the environment in which Deaf students find themselves, including their backgrounds, the history of Deaf students' access to tertiary education, and funding. This paper draws from this literature and the experience of being an interpreter in the academy.

#### PREPARATION OF THE SELF/ PERSONAL PREPARATION

NZSL is not a system of visual signs that represent the words of spoken language. It is a language in its own right, descended from British Sign Language (BSL) and related to Australian Sign Language (Auslan) (Collins-Ahlgren 1989; McKee 2002). Signed languages have been shown to be three-dimensional languages with the same characteristics as spoken language, including their own unique grammar, syntax, phonology and morphology (Stokoe, Casterline and Croneberg 1965). An interpreter is an individual who is trained to be bilingual and bicultural, to achieve equivalence between languages, and to give consideration to cultural perspectives on the meaning of a message. This section explores the various considerations of interpreters when they are preparing to interpret in academic settings.

Like other professionals, interpreters follow a code of ethics. Our code lays the foundation for all the work we do. Interpreters should be vigilant in maintaining ethical practice, as many of the quandaries in which we find ourselves can be defined as ethical dilemmas. Understanding the importance of the interpreters' ethics is fundamental to appreciating our role and efficacy in academic settings.

Academic interpreting is a mainstay for interpreters and has been since interpreters first became widely available in New Zealand. Prior to the establishment of the Diploma course at AUT in mid 1992, there were only three trained interpreters working in New Zealand. They were trained in 1985 by an American, Dan Levitt, who provided a three-month crash course, supported by the New Zealand Association for the Deaf (Dugdale 2001). They went on to work in Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch respectively and, because they were so few, were not usually available to interpret in academic institutions. Between these three interpreters becoming available and the inception of the Diploma course at AUT, several interpreters came to New Zealand from

abroad either for short periods of one to two years or (in the case of two of them) for good. Only a small handful of Deaf people used interpreters for access to tertiary studies at this time. When interpreters began to graduate in larger numbers from the new Diploma course (eight in the first 'batch' and eleven in the second), there were more opportunities for Deaf people to begin thinking about using interpreters in tertiary settings. Initially the need for interpreters outstripped the number of qualified interpreters available. I remember doing a practicum interpreting as a second-year student in conferences and post-graduate lectures! The number of Deaf students accessing tertiary education has increased steadily since interpreters became more available. But the situation is still less than optimal, constrained as it is by limited interpreter numbers.

Deaf people use sign language interpreters to gain access to any situation where there will be communication using spoken language. Sign language interpreters, however, interpret in a wider variety of environments than foreign language interpreters do. Like foreign language interpreters, we may be booked for assignments in community situations such as at the doctor's or dentist's office, but it is also common to interpret in academic situations such as undergraduate or postgraduate lectures and tutorials, as well as the conferences where spoken language interpreters might work. Overseas students usually learn the language of academic instruction before enrolling for a course. For Deaf students, however, sign language, note-taking, real time captioning and reading give access to a subject curriculum in the academy. Academic interpreting entails a more extensive number of subjects, fields, languages and dynamics than any other kind of interpreting.

### *Balancing Competence, Impartiality and Accuracy*

Competence, Impartiality and Accuracy are key principles in the interpreter's code of ethics. The Sign Language Interpreters Association of New Zealand (SLIANZ) was first incorporated in 1997, a very young profession in comparison with other developed countries. The SLIANZ code of ethics was loosely copied from the one being used at the time in the United States. Internationally, most codes of ethics have roughly the same constituent principles. Currently the American Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) is reviewing its code of ethics extensively to include far more detailed examples and descriptions of appropriate conduct. The review covers, for example, use of cell phones in assignments and respect for clients. New Zealand interpreters continue to be led by our overseas counterparts, with their many more years of experience and greater numbers.

Our code of ethics is seen as a collection of principles that is open to interpretation in the interests of correct application. With reference to the ethic of competence, ‘interpreters shall only accept assignments in which they are reasonably expert to interpret competently having ascertained the level of skill required, the setting and the consumers [*or audiences, in this case*] involved. If an interpreter believes he/she is not able to interpret competently he/she will inform both parties and negotiate an acceptable solution’ (SLIANZ 2005:6). Impartiality means that ‘interpreters shall never counsel, advise or interject personal opinions during the interpreting assignment’ (SLIANZ 2005:6). In other words, ‘Interpreters shall not allow their personal interests and beliefs to influence the interpreting assignment. Interpreters will remove themselves if the interpretation is influenced by a lack of impartiality’ (SLIANZ 2005:6). And, with reference to accuracy – the ‘interpreters will, to the best of their ability interpret the meaning of the message in the manner in which it was intended without adding or omitting anything’ (SLIANZ 2005:6).

We interpreters are well versed in the cultures between which we interpret, the languages in which we interpret and the comparative semantics of these, but we are not experts in the fields in which we interpret, nor are we experts in Deaf culture. At the time of writing there is currently no specialist sign language interpreter training in New Zealand beyond the two-year basic diploma program in sign language interpreting offered by AUT.

When interpreters graduate, they can be booked for any subject from a first year medicine paper to a post-graduate course in computer programming. Specialisation has yet to develop in New Zealand to anything more than a superficial degree. In-depth knowledge of any subject area would greatly assist interpreters. However, even if interpreters specialise in a field, like academic interpreting, there are still too many subjects within that field for one interpreter ever to become proficient in the specific domain that a Deaf student could choose to study. Moreover, were interpreters to study subjects to a competent level, for example computer programming, this expertise is likely to provide a more profitable occupation than sign language interpreting, thereby defeating the purpose. This is a common frustration among Deaf students (Harrington 2000; Johnson 1992).

While sign language interpreters do come to the profession from various backgrounds, bringing with them knowledge and skills already acquired from previous experience, there are only approximately sixty qualified New Zealand sign language interpreters currently working in New Zealand. Some have come from Deaf families (see Wenda Walton’s paper in this collection)

and others from hearing families, many seeking a career change. This is both a benefit and a disadvantage. Interpreters who have had prior careers might have previous experience in university study, trades or professions, but older students do not learn a new language as readily as a younger student does, so fluency takes much longer to develop (and in some cases never does). The one thing that most New Zealand interpreters have in common is that we have been interpreting for less than ten years. The sign language interpreting profession in New Zealand has few masters. It becomes a case, then, of individual interpreters weighing up whether or not they can do the assignment sufficient justice so as to be ethical under the ethic of competence, and to seek adequate preparation materials to equip themselves for the assignment. Problems arise when no interpreter is capable of taking on, or willing to take on an assignment. This tends to be an issue in technical subjects using difficult or specific vocabulary such as law, sciences and Te Reo Maori. For example, there is currently only one trilingual interpreter of NZSL, Te Reo Maori and English who has formal qualifications in all of these areas. Several others have informal knowledge of Te Reo but formal qualifications in NZSL interpreting (though this does not necessarily reflect the quality of that knowledge) and vice versa. Given that Maori are over-represented in the Deaf population, this is an understandably frustrating situation for Maori Deaf people (Smiler 2004). Even if Maori speakers learn NZSL or interpreters learn Maori, the field is so embryonic that there is no career path or positive benefit, in terms of financial recognition, attached to it.

#### THE ECONOMICS OF INTERPRETING

Many Deaf and hearing clients feel that NZSL interpreters are extremely well paid. On the surface of it this would appear to be true. However, this is not borne out by the figures. The top rate of pay for an experienced interpreter is usually forty dollars an hour when on an hourly arrangement. I charge a little more than this and consider the extra money to be well spent, and so do many of my clients. In the long run, it is less costly to pay a little more for a proficient interpreter than using a slower, less educated or less accurate one. For community interpreting I am able to charge a minimum of two hours which covers the time it takes me to get to and from the assignment, petrol, preparation time and other minor overheads such as bookwork, stationery and so forth. For an academic assignment, I am asked to provide services on a one-hour tenure and work as a wage earner or employee of the institution. This means that I must travel unpaid to the interpreting job, pay for my parking (most tertiary institutions are in the city) and cannot offset any of my

expenses against my income tax. I am therefore taxed on the whole amount I earn. For the sake of argument:

One hour	\$40.00
Less tax @ 19.5% (sometimes 33%!)	\$7.80
Less parking (minimum)	\$5.00
Total	\$27.20
<i>Divided by actual time spent (2hrs)</i>	<i>\$13.60</i>

It takes at least half an hour to get to the job from home, find a park and find the classroom, and another half-hour to get home again, so the job actually takes up two hours of the working week, not one. The total hourly income, after tax earnings, are actually \$13.60 per hour. This would compare to a typing job or other semi-skilled position. On the plus side, academic institutions will sometimes pay you for time spent reading preparation material, unlike community assignments (unless this is arranged prior and this is very unusual). However, academic interpreting is usually capped, which deters interpreters from accepting assignments in courses with heavy content. If the interpreter is parked for a whole day and takes on a number of assignments at the same venue, an economy of scale is achieved. This must be balanced by the fact that academic interpreting is often the most physically demanding interpreting, and as such, an appropriate maximum number of hours per week would be less than what is often called by interpreters 'the magical' twenty-five (see below). This would amount to a *before* tax income somewhere between NZ\$24,500 and \$28,000 per annum based on twenty-eight weeks of classes. Interpreters do not get paid in the holidays but may do freelance community work then. In addition, twenty-five hours is usually the amount required by institutions to be worked for a salaried position (note that salaried positions tend to be paid at between NZ\$30–\$45,000 per annum with benefits, making them alluring). It is little wonder that only two New Zealand tertiary institutions employ salaried interpreters. Having said this, there are gains to be made in not investing staff time in the fraught activity of hunting and booking interpreters, and one of these two institutions is in a region where, without fixed employment, no interpreters could make themselves available. In New Zealand, the twenty-five hours of working has often been allocated to working without a co-worker, and this is quite different from twenty-five hours of teamed work. This scenario has led to more and more interpreters leaving or partially leaving the profession due to injury (myself included) and for greener pastures. Support at state level is required if this situation is to be remedied.

Tertiary institutions currently receive a special supplementary grant of \$32.18 per disabled equivalent full time student (EFTS). This is to be pooled and used for students with disabilities. However, this system discriminates against a tiny polytechnic with seven Deaf students in comparison to a university of 12,000 or more EFTS with only one Deaf student. When an institution is seen as providing exemplary services to Deaf students, this becomes public knowledge within the Deaf community so that that institution attracts Deaf students away from other institutions. This actually disadvantages institutions that are doing a good job of catering to the needs of Deaf students. However, institutions are required by the Ministry of Education to use funds from their general bulk fund for the specific benefit of disabled students, but this is rarely done on any great scale. Another funding alternative is Workbridge (a government funded disability employment agency) that was established in 1994. Workbridge has a funding limit per person per lifetime of around NZ\$15,000. Private scholarships are available to Deaf students from anywhere in the order of one to several thousand dollars.

### *Occupational Wellbeing*

Sign language interpreting can be likened to typing in terms of its ability to cause cumulative strain injuries. But, because of the Accuracy ethic, sign language interpreters are unable to take breaks at our leisure. This can mean that we get caught in situations where we are in front of an audience, cannot stop interpreting, and find ourselves having to continue despite the presence of pain. For this reason it is crucial that we know as much as possible about the dynamics of a job before accepting it. It is not uncommon to be asked to interpret in conditions that endanger our safety because of financial constraints. For example, I once arrived at a weeklong conference only to discover that I was expected to work alone. Much was made of my telling them that I would rather have my health than the money, but common sense prevailed in the end and this became a watershed in the history of interpreters' self-advocacy. It is not immediately apparent to a layperson that sign language interpreters must protect their physical safety. However, once I feel that I am competent to take on a job, I must ascertain whether provisions will be made for a five-minute break every half-hour. In the event of a particularly long or difficult assignment or one where breaks are impossible, such as a keynote speech, I need another interpreter teamed with me to work in rotation. In this instance we must agree on what length of time we will each interpret before switching. Often this is as little as saying, 'Twenty-twenty?' before the speaker begins, meaning twenty minutes each turn. But it can become more complicated depending on the dynamics of the interaction. When working in a team we will



also agree on what strengths we will each use to improve the quality of the interpretation. For example, if the other interpreter has seen a video before that is to be used as part of the presentation, he or she may offer to interpret that. Also, when interpreting from sign language to voice, one may offer to interpret male interpreter to male speaker, female interpreter to female speaker. Depending on the kind of assignment, we may meet beforehand to discuss readings, vocabulary, pragmatics and management of breaks. I have interpreted sitting at the front for hearing lecturers, sitting with the students for Deaf lecturers, and jumping up and down depending on who wanted to speak in a situation where there was a Deaf lecturer but hearing students who would occasionally take the floor to give presentations. I have interpreted for two speakers on a panel and had my co-worker interpret for the other two to reduce the confusion between who was saying what. This had to be agreed mid-flight based on who was the most verbose on the panel to ensure an even distribution of labour. Because interpreters are ethically bound not to omit anything, we feel conflicted when we are unable to take a break for our own physical health. (The preparation of the setting, including placement of furniture, levels of lighting and so on, is discussed below.)

In most academic institutions there is a disability office responsible for employing the services of sign language interpreters. This is where most negotiations are made for suitable breaks, number of interpreters, payment and additional payment for time spent on preparation. In the case of a conference one negotiates conditions with the organisers. This requires an accurate idea of the dynamics and duration of tasks. I have turned up many a time with a co-worker to interpret a lecture and found that it is a mixed workshop of Deaf and hearing people, and group work will be required. If more than one group includes Deaf people, it requires both my colleague and myself to compromise our safety by losing our breaks. The clients are always apologetic but still expect us to go ahead and work unsafely anyway. If universities have a disability coordinator or disability office, they usually have information available for lecturers and tutors on how to work effectively with interpreters. In the Auckland region, the Advance Centre for Deaf and Hearing Impaired Tertiary Students is funded to perform this function across a number of tertiary institutions including AUT, University of Auckland, Unitec, Massey University Albany Campus and Manukau Institute of Technology.

#### PREPARATION OF THE MATERIAL

Once interpreters have established that they are prepared to accept the assignment, they need to peruse preparation material. I will usually ask for

lecture notes, printouts of power-point presentations, what prior knowledge the students/audience might be assumed to have (so I then have it too) or at least general prior knowledge in this subject. Interpreters must usually ask the lecturer for these or for a referral to suitable reading material such as a course texts. Sometimes disability officers will do this for us. I will also ask for handouts that are going to be used, videos that will be shown – assuming they are not subtitled, visuals that will be used, glossaries of terms, and readings and references that will be used. In one course that I interpreted for there was a stack an inch thick of research to be read every week prior to a one-hour lecture. It was very dense reading, so my colleague and I negotiated for extra preparation time. Had this not been granted, this course would have been an extremely unprofitable and an undesirable undertaking.

When we are ‘on’ interpreters are engaged in such a high concentration task that it is essential for as little of our ‘working memory’ to be occupied with new words or concepts as possible (Baddeley and Hitch, cited in Cowan 2000/2001:120). ‘Simultaneous interpreting’ began with the Nuremberg trials. The trials took so long that interpreters were urged to work simultaneously with the presentation of information (Humphrey and Alcorn 2001; Flintoff 2004). Despite complaints from the interpreting profession, this popularised simultaneous interpreting which then became the main form of interpretation for conferences. The term is now used synonymously with conference interpreting. To interpret simultaneously, an interpreter is delivering an interpreted message in the target language, at the same time analysing the next piece of the message for meaning and intent, and finding accurate phrasing in the target language. While we are doing all of this we are listening to a third portion of message to be stored in our short-term memory for processing next. Moser-Mercer (cited in Flintoff 2004:42) finds that ‘[d]uring a regular 30-minute turn, working from an original speaker whose speaking speed is between 100 and 130 words per minute, an interpreter processes and delivers final copy of an average of 3,000 to 3,900 words.’ It has not yet been established whether an interpreter’s attention jumps rapidly between the tasks or performs all three tasks simultaneously. Simultaneous interpreting is designed to work for spontaneous spoken language.

Because written language is very dense and the reader need not pause for thought, written language that is read out is especially challenging for us. If I know that readings are going to be used, I will usually ask the readers to be conscious of their pace and try to pre-process some of the material by reading it and rehearsing. It is one thing to interpret a spontaneous monologue and quite another to interpret for someone reading from ‘Kant’s Critique of

Pure Reason'. In the event that this kind of material is included ad hoc, I will endeavour to do the best rendition possible. However, omissions and errors are much more prevalent under these circumstances.

Where handouts or readings have been given to students/audience prior to the commencement of the session, I prefer to have read these before I begin interpreting that session. I underline anything I do not understand and seek clarification from the presenter where needed. An interpreter is an extra filter through which the listener receives a message. If I have not understood, the listener has little or no chance of understanding unless they already know enough about the topic for my errors to be obvious to them. Deaf students also need to make sure that they have read and digested handouts and done any other homework set. If they come to class unprepared, then no matter how much preparation I have done, or how good my interpreting may be, they may not understand the messages that I am presenting.

Surprisingly, it is the complicated nature of this interpreting that draws many interpreters to the field of academic interpreting. One of my colleagues remarked to me recently that she thoroughly enjoys the learning and exposure to new concepts that goes along with the amount of preparation she has to do when working in tertiary institutions.

### *Comparative Vocabularies*

Difficulties in interpretation may arise from names that need to be spelled out in sign language. Sign languages usually have a sign-name system that generates signs for known individuals. There is not usually a sign for a person who is outside the Deaf community (McKee and McKee 2000). There may be words that are in a foreign language or are technical, idiomatic or unique to the particular field – for example, in textiles, talking about the 'nap' of the fabric, or 'accruals' in an accounting lecture. There may also be acronyms that sound like words, which can cause interpreters to misunderstand the source language. In seeking prior readings, interpreters are attempting to get a 'macro-picture' of the topic at hand, where it fits into their own schema (Humphrey and Alcorn 2001). We are also trying to get a 'micro-picture' of a topic – to understand exactly what main points speakers are trying to elucidate or describe and how their topics fits together. Sometimes a speaker may wish to get across the exact wording of quotes, and one needs to know that this is the intent, otherwise the wording will be dropped in favour of the meaning. I also want to know how information will be related to the class/audience. Being the 'hands' of one person is much less strenuous than signing for an interactive

group of fifty people interrupting one another. I have been in tutorials where the communication relies purely on the strategies of interrupting and having the loudest voice and finally begged that the participants please use a 'hands-up' policy and wait until indicated to take their turn. Chaos inevitably returns after awhile.

Interpreters are faced with immense challenges when taking academic or technical language and fitting it into a language that has never before been used to discuss a particular topic. It is not so much that the language has no capacity to describe academic concepts. It is rather that we must use existing language to explore uncharted territory. This is challenging given that we are hearing, and as such, sign language is more often than not our second language. It is only when these concepts become well traversed that the Deaf community begins to recognise standard applications of signs in association with certain topics. In the meantime, interpreters must use circumlocution to explain their way around subject-specific jargon or the jargon of the academy – for example, the use of the word 'argument' to mean describing a proposition and elaborating it in the academy as compared to its use in the mainstream to mean conflict. Such explanations take much longer than in English and mean having to sign very fast or getting behind and risking dropping part of the message. Where appropriate we will interrupt a speaker to get clarification of a point. Alternatively, we may finger spell the English word, which also takes longer, or agree – with the Deaf person's approval – on a temporary sign to be used for the concept. This sign is then usually used only for the duration of the interpreting assignment. As hearing people, interpreters avoid shaping the language of the Deaf community by promulgating our own made-up signs outside of interpreting assignments.

This situation comes about because sign languages have historically been oppressed and, in many places in the world, have become accepted as true languages only in the last fifteen to twenty years (Van Cleve 1993; Corazza 1993; Sutton-Spence 2004). In New Zealand signing became 'acceptable' only after about 1980 (McKee 2002; Dugdale 2002) when signed English began to be used in schools and later when NZSL was introduced in 1995 (Sameshima 1999; Dugdale 2002). Because sign language was seen as inferior, many Deaf people were educated in the oral method (Dugdale 2002). This uses speech and lip-reading and employs 'residual hearing' to focus on the spoken word. However, sign languages survived underground, passed on from generation to generation in schools for the deaf by older children, Deaf staff at these schools, and those who had Deaf parents (Collins-Ahlgren 1989). Because of this history, sign language has been excluded from academic pursuits and

therefore has not 'grown into' them. Also, because many Deaf people did not achieve well under the oral education system, they had few opportunities to go on to further study, and so there was little exposure of the Deaf community to the language and concepts of the academy.

#### PREPARATION OF THE SETTING

In this section I discuss the components that impact on how well the setting is prepared for interpreting. The components in need of consideration include: developing relationships with academic staff; understanding classroom dynamics; identifying how visual aids will be used; ascertaining if there will be Deaf presenters; becoming familiar with the physical surroundings; and being sensitive to cultural differences.

#### *Relationship with Academic Staff*

Interpreters need to form a relationship with the academic staff with whom they are to work. In New Zealand, Britain (Harrington 2000) and the United States (Johnson 1992), lecturers often assume that there is nothing further required of them, in catering for the needs of a Deaf student, than the provision of a sign language interpreter. Some are overtly hostile, insisting that an interpreter at the front of the room would be 'distracting for the hearing students'. This can sometimes be the case but usually does not last past the first five minutes of the lecture and is a learning experience for them in any case. Frequently we are seen as helpers for the Deaf student. From this angle, accessibility comes to be seen as our problem, but this is unsatisfactory. It is to a presenter's advantage to work with us as colleagues to deliver a professional, accessible and noteworthy performance. When academic staff members are not accommodating, the interpretation suffers, resulting in an inferior experience for the student. One assignment I was arranging never actually transpired because the lecturer refused to have an interpreter at the front of the room, and the Deaf student became so annoyed at his attitude that he decided against attending. This situation often leads students to review the value of a speaker, and consequently the value they place on their interaction. It is particularly objectionable when fees have been paid for instruction. Usually interpreters will try to reduce the risk of a stand-off by approaching presenters or lecturers in a friendly manner, aiming to inform them of our role in the classroom as an impartial communication associate, not able to help with, intervene in or comment on the lecture, as per the interpreters' code of ethics. I am intensely conscious of power relationships and not interfering with them.

### *Classroom Dynamics*

Classroom dynamics are an important consideration in academic interpreting. If there is to be group work, no chance of having a break every half-hour, or some other demanding circumstance, then interpreters must discover this in their communication with presenters or coordinators so that additional interpreters can be booked. Providing inadequate working conditions for interpreters is not only a problem for us. It results in errors, inferior interpretation due to fatigue and, longitudinally, fewer interpreters due to injury. This impacts negatively on the Deaf community, with an estimated population of 7,700 NZSL and signed English users (Statistics New Zealand 2001) relying heavily on the sixty or so qualified interpreters available. If the student group is physically mobile, it will affect the positioning of interpreters. If there is an opportunity for many questions, it will be harder for me to manage the entire discourse without help from the presenter in the form of facilitation, so I will ask about the discursive dynamics of the group, and request appropriate support.

Interpreters can interpret all that they hear and understand (assuming a reasonable pace) but cannot interpret more than one source at a time. For this reason, part of our preparation will be to persuade speakers to facilitate communication, enforcing turn taking more strictly than in an all-hearing setting. Again we feel that we are ethically obliged to get as much of an unmanaged interaction across to avoid omission, but the faster we work, the more at risk we are of injury. It also helps for clients to know the bounds of our capacity. We may ask speakers to speak more slowly if they are ordinarily very fast. We may also assure speakers that it is not necessary to speak a word at a time, as we interpret for meaning at sentence level rather than word for word. I have had a speaker turn to look at me after every disjointed word he uttered, waiting for me to sign it. I reassured him that he could 'speak naturally' in order that I would have something to interpret! This is a familiar reaction to our profession that curiously seems to be more prevalent in general practitioners' offices.

### *Visual Aids*

While the consumers (Deaf and hearing) of interpreting services must assume some responsibility for providing access, it is often up to interpreters to educate them on how the assignment can be managed satisfactorily. In addition, the history of Deaf education needs to be taken into consideration when making interpreting decisions. The most salient issues that Sameshima (1999)

discovered in her research were:

- poor quality of education in the years prior to tertiary education;
- insufficient numbers of trained sign language interpreters;
- insufficient numbers of skilled notetakers;
- lack of awareness about Deaf people by tertiary institutions;
- disability coordinators' lack of knowledge about Deaf students' needs and their lack of signing skills;
- difficulties for Deaf students with academic discourse due to poor literacy skills; and,
- Deaf students' inability to interact meaningfully with hearing students.

Sign language interpreting cannot be a cure-all for every barrier experienced by Deaf students in the academy. One of the most frequent obstacles to the interpreting process is described as 'visual shifting' (Johnson 1992:125). Johnson (1992:146) describes a situation in which, 'The anthropology professor spoke, drew, and pointed to the board or to a transparency at the same time. I [*a Deaf student*] had trouble following these discussions because my interpreter was a sentence or so behind, making it impossible for me to look at the board and follow the interpreter simultaneously.'

When Deaf people receive information it is almost entirely with their eyes. This means that they are either looking at the interpreter to 'hear' what is being said or looking at visuals but not both. However, in most learning environments speakers often give two sources of information concurrently. This includes showing a picture and talking about it at the same time, showing videos with narration, and projecting a table by overhead projector while verbally deciphering its contents. Students may be expected to make notes or sign the roll while lecturers speak to them or to look to see who is talking and then find out what they are saying. A scenario in a computer tutorial would be the lecturer pointing to an enlarged screen and saying something like, 'If you click on this icon here, you will get a drop down list from which you can choose the type of font you want.' The Deaf student would be so busy looking at me to follow the commentary of the lecturer that they could not look to see *which* icon to click on. This might continue throughout the tutorial, despite the protests of the student, and serves as an excellent illustration of the fundamental differences in the way that Deaf students receive a lecture.

For a Deaf person, only one channel can be received at a time. If a picture is being shown, then the Deaf student needs a chance to look at that before looking back to the interpreter to receive the commentary. This is exacerbated

by the fact that the interpreter is necessarily one to two sentences behind the speaker, and as such, the Deaf person often finds out too late what it is they need to look for in the visual (Johnson 1992). If the roll needs to be signed or notes are to be taken, the Deaf person must look away from their source of information (the interpreter) to look down at the paper before them unless (ideally) a notetaker is provided. This means that the Deaf person is not able to receive all of the information given in an address and could miss important information or information that is going to be included in exams. Interpreters can mitigate this by requesting that presenters/lecturers pause when showing visuals before making comments, but our requests are frequently forgotten in the lecturer's focus on content. Also, subtitled versions of videos or DVD's can be suggested if they are available (so that the Deaf person need only look at the screen) but only if interpreters know that they are going to be used, prior to the assignment. Interpreters often say that simultaneously interpreting a video is difficult (due to the speed of speakers), stressful and almost impossible to do effectively. It almost always leads to a lack of understanding. In the absence of suitable accommodations being made, interpreters often try to compensate by storing long segments of commentary, in our heads, until Deaf people are able to look back and then trying to catch them up. This, again, is more physically demanding on us. Preparing well and making recommendations can avoid only some of this.

### *Deaf Presenters*

Most of what I have outlined above is true both where the Deaf person is the student and where the Deaf person is a speaker/lecturer. However, preparation of the setting can depend on the majority group and in which direction interpreters will be working. One difference, where a Deaf person is the speaker, is that we will be interpreting mostly from sign language as the source language to spoken language as the target language. If the topic is technical in nature, involving unfamiliar jargon, then interpreters need to ensure that this is learned before the assignment. Because this cannot be done over the telephone, it often requires us to make contact beforehand or arrange to meet before the commencement of the presentation. I will ensure that presenters are aware of, and keeping an eye on me so that their attention can be got easily in the event that I need clarification (attention-getting with a Deaf person is necessarily visual). I will sometimes ask about acoustic provisions, for example microphones and speakers in a larger setting, and ensure that these are arranged in such a way as to be accessible and effective. Because the use of audio equipment is not common in Deaf culture, interpreters sometimes become the most expert person available.



*Physical Surroundings*

Finally, I take into consideration the physical surroundings. If a sign language interpreter has never been used in this situation before, I may need to request appropriate seating (an adjustable chair that has no arms), adequate space, and to be positioned at the front of the room. However, in academic interpreting, not all presentations are made from a lectern. I once had to negotiate with a group to stop every so often on their way up the craggy face of Snowdonia so that the lecture could be interpreted while stopped rather than trying to climb and interpret at the same time. The lesson was then interpreted facing the Deaf person, and all at the same time. (I have also interpreted in caves, outside a classroom in the snow, in darkrooms, on dive-boats, in empty swimming pools – there are infinite possibilities.) On some occasions our requests require a lot of charm. Some presenters are reluctant to share a stage or allow interpreters to get close to a projection screen, which is desirable from the perspective of a Deaf student. Interpreters are painfully aware that getting on the wrong side of a lecturer can lead them to further disadvantage a Deaf student. This should not be so, but we must deal with what we have, not with what we should have.

Often lights will be turned down or off in a lecture theatre, which is parallel to turning the sound down or off for a hearing person. If the presenter mentions that this may happen, interpreters can arrange for separate lighting for themselves ahead of time or negotiate a compromise. On one occasion I interpreted in an observatory under the red tail light from someone's bicycle! If visuals are referred to in discussion, I might request a copy that I can keep on a low table in front of me so that spatial references to the visuals can retain their integrity in my interpretation. Additionally, I might suggest that jargon is minimal. This allows for a much clearer message, as finger spelling of longer words can be difficult to make out, especially at speed or from a distant seat.

*Cultural Differences*

Interpreting is not a cure-all solution to the cultural divide in the academic classroom. There are infinite possibilities for presenters to make their presentations more easily interpretable. In this article I have outlined ways of making a hearing setting interpreter-friendly, but this does not necessarily allow for the cultural discourse concerning differences between Deaf and hearing people. An example of this is that Deaf people often organise a presentation deductively – stating the main point first and subsequently referring to this in explaining the reasoning for their conjecture (Scollon and Wong

Scollon 2002). Hearing people will often present a point inductively – giving an account and finishing up with their conclusion (Scollon and Wong Scollon 2002). Since simultaneous interpreting happens sentence by sentence, the interpreter is not capable of compensating for this and other cultural differences. Another example is that hearing people will interrupt with verbal cues while Deaf people use raising of hands, which is a visual cue. Mindess (1999:39) explains:

There is often a quick back-and-forth Ping-Pong match of comments between the teacher and students, all of whom rely on paralinguistic cues to judge when they can jump in, ask a question, or raise a new point. The interpreter, by necessity, will always be at least half a sentence behind the discussion, after which the Deaf student must digest the information, which puts him or her even further behind... All these factors put the Deaf student at a decided disadvantage in terms of class participation.

In a hearing environment it is easy for a Deaf person to be marginalised by the simple fact that the facilitator does not choose speakers based on who has their hand up. Accounting for cultural differences is the responsibility of the institution and individual presenters. Harrington (2000) further describes the implications of turn taking and timing in an interpreted conversation and how an interpreter's lag-time affects participants' perception of who is talking and the resultant misunderstandings that can be caused. It is often up to the interpreter in this situation to try to minimise the confusion and decide what and when something has to be dropped out of necessity.

#### INTERPRETERS DREAM OF IDEAL WORKING PARTNERSHIPS

In conclusion, many interpreters fall short of their obligations in attempting to prepare themselves, the material and the setting for an academic assignment. Academics are often the easiest hearing clients because they are open to new concepts, quickly adapting to the needs of interpreters working in their domain, and seizing opportunities to meet the needs of their audience. Unfortunately, however, it is not uncommon for interpreters attempting to initiate contact with presenters to receive no response to e-mails and telephone messages. Ironically, some lecturers are hesitant to hand over lecture notes, citing a concern that a Deaf student will be at an unfair advantage! Harrington (2000) notes in his study that educational interpreters in the United Kingdom frequently said that they wished for greater amounts of preparation material, to have that preparation in advance and to have better relationships

with hearing professionals. This sentiment can be echoed in New Zealand where interpreters have been around for a much shorter period and have also been exposed to a much smaller population of educators.

Johnson (1992) suggests that Deaf students themselves prepare for tertiary study by learning more about the interpreting process and how to improve its effectiveness on their part, and further recommends that hearing teachers observe the ways in which Deaf teachers manage their lessons. Interpreters, for their part, are professionally obligated to work with presenters and students towards achieving the best standards possible for intercultural communication, so they must attempt to keep discussions in progress. If presenters, students and interpreters in academic settings see themselves as teammates, then interpreters are able to guide presenters in providing an enriching occasion for the entire audience, not only those depending on the interpretation to access the content.

#### NOTES

- 1 The notation system used for this section of the NZSL sentence is that of Mikos et al (2001) and the short table below explains the system a little further.

Symbol	Example	Explanation
WORD	BUILDING	An English word in Capital letters representing the sign (a Gloss). The meaning may not be exactly the same in NZSL and English.
IX	IX ' <i>building</i> '	Short for INDEX, this convention represents where pointing to a space is used as a pronoun to refer to the object enclosed in quotation marks. The actual word itself is not used.
DCL		Short for descriptive classifier used to describe a person or thing. The object is identified by the word italicised in quotation marks.

- 2 The Sign Language Interpreter's Association of New Zealand Incorporated publishes guidelines for interpreters annually in their register of qualified interpreters. The guideline on confidentiality includes the statement that interpreters shall treat as confidential any information gained through an assignment including the fact of their having undertaken an assignment. The ethical guideline limits the examples on which I can draw to illustrate this paper.

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