

## Interpreting for Foreign Language Classes

According to the 2009 Modern Language Association of America survey<sup>i</sup>, the fifteen most commonly taught languages at institutions of higher education in the U. S. are: (in descending order) Spanish, French, German, ASL, Italian, Japanese, Chinese, Arabic, Russian, Greek (Ancient), Hebrew (Biblical), Portuguese, Korean, Hebrew (Modern). According to the same survey there are 244 other languages that are less commonly taught. I have interpreted courses in: German, French, Japanese, Italian, ASL, Spanish, and Korean, in a variety of settings from Elementary through Post Secondary settings. Availing me of exposure to almost half of the top fifteen. From my experiences I would like to share some things I have found to be helpful and some pitfalls to avoid.

There are many reasons Deaf people take foreign language classes. A Deaf adult may be planning a trip to another country and wants to be able to read and write essential concepts while in that country. A Deaf student may want to enter into or graduate from an institute of higher education that does not (as of yet) recognize fluency in ASL as satisfying the foreign language requirement. The task of interpreting a foreign language is very taxing therefore knowing the goals of the Deaf participant, from self enrichment / interest to prescribed mandate, can help the interpreters focus his / her limited energy into the most pertinent areas of this complicated process thereby better

meeting the desires / needs of the Deaf student.

My overall arch of focus is to enable the creation of a dynamically equivalent interpretation in a foreign language class.

### What are some strategies to meet the challenges in this setting?

Fingerspelling:

Each language has its unique written (visual) representation of the sounds within it. (Letters, Characters) Ex: ñ ü ß Ç. Each language has its own set of letters / characters that may exceed the 26 letters in the English / ASL fingerspelled alphabet. One helpful website is Omniglot<sup>ii</sup>. It is a helpful resource to see the differences in written alphabets. To compensate for the differences in letters between alphabets the interpreters can discuss with the Deaf student how the unique letters will be represented. One option is to research the Sign Language manual alphabet that is used in the country of the spoken language. I have added links for eleven manual alphabets that are part of the top fifteen most commonly taught languages<sup>iii</sup>. I have found 120 different fingerspelling alphabets via electronic formats (on-line, smart phone apps).

Learning and using the entire manual alphabet of a different language would not only be difficult for the interpreters but may put a burden on the Deaf student that the hearing students do not have, namely to learn two visual representations (written & fingerspelling) of the target language. The hearing students do not need to learn the sounds in the language being taught

that are the same as English only the unique ones, this should be kept true for Deaf students.

Many languages do not use Romanized characters, (Hebrew, Chinese, Arabic) however some of the languages not using Romanized characters that are taught in the U.S. have had Romanizations created to represent the sounds of the language. Ex: Hanyu Pinyin for Chinese, McCune-Reischauer for Korean.<sup>iv</sup>

It is vital that the interpreters learn what letters in the foreign words are present yet silent or that have pronunciation that differ from English in order to inform the Deaf student who has decided to speak for themselves so he / she will know the difference between pronunciation and spelling.

Using a Sign Language from the country of the spoken language or ASL:

Incorporating signs from the Sign Language of the country who's spoken language is being taught has its benefits and drawbacks. Does the Deaf student want to learn two new languages? The Sign and Spoken language may be very different grammatically. If an interpreter throws many signs from another language together the result will not represent either the spoken or signed language's grammar. If the student wants to learn both the signed and spoken languages then the interpreters would need to be fluent in the other country's Sign Language and take on the role of teacher. (which in itself is problematic)

Incorporating a few signs from another sign language can be helpful. For example If the language has a frozen phrases like Korean 안녕하세요.

(*Annyeonghaseyo*) which means Hello, how are you? - I'm fine, and you? - I'm fine, too, thank you. Literally "am peaceful" (this is a standard greeting) Spelling *Annyeonghaseyo* each time it is said would be an unneeded stress on the interpreters hands. Electronic resources like: web sites, DVDs, or Apps can provide the Korean Sign Language sign used for *Annyeonghaseyo*. However diving in and using many signs pulled from electronic resources can cause more problems, due to their linguistic limitations, than the reduction in fingerspelling eliminates. Language is not a compilation of signs but holds a unique grammar. We are all aware that ASL grammar is different from English, the same holds true for other countries Sign & Spoken Languages.

After a vocabulary word from the new language has been fully introduced by fingerspelling and the students have learnt the word, substituting an ASL sign while moving your mouth in the pronunciation of the foreign word is one way to reduce the amount of fingerspelling required in the class. This is in essence sim-comming which alone is a difficult (some say impossible) task to do satisfactorily with the added difficulty of "pronouncing" a foreign word.

Many languages have "loan words" taken from English or English has "borrowed" a word from the other language. The ASL Sign for the loan word can be easily used to represent the loan word with caution taken to inform the student of any derivation in spelling.

Semantic depth; words / signs of one language do not correlate 100% to any other languages word / sign. In an

introductory course for another language a simplified or most common meaning of a word will be presented. The words actual full range of meaning may be drastically different from the full meaning of the first sign that was paired with the word. Compare the semantic range of the English word *run* with ASL's representations of the same range of meanings. Work with the student to plan how corrections will be made when greater depth or range of meaning to the foreign words is presented. Will the new information effect what sign will be used in the future? Perhaps fingerspell that word from now on would be better.

Languages handle conjugations differently. Care should be taken before deciding to use an ASL sign for a word in the language being taught because the word may change spelling, pronunciation, and meaning when conjugated.

Grammar differences:

Conjugation may be affected by person, number, gender, tense, aspect, mood, voice, honorific, deferential as well as other reasons. Interpreters will have to listen intently and practice identifying the differences in conjugation. In some instances a word can be so extremely modified that signing all the included meanings would take longer than fingerspelling the word. Ex: Korean: 하게씨요 is just the conjugation added to a verb. The conjugation means: declarative, future, conditional, informal, high.

Parts of speech vary from language to language so the interpreters will need to negotiate how the parts of speech in the target language with no correlation in ASL or English will be

represented. Ex: gender identifiers, el, la.

Word order also varies from language to language. In English the word order of a typical sentence is Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) however other languages may be any of the following: SOV, VSO, VOS, OVS, OSV. Keeping the source language word order while representing the words with ASL signs can only be accomplished with practice and attention to detail. Use of space to visually compare the English or ASL natural order with the new language order is a useful tool.

Classroom negotiations:

The interpreters absolutely **MUST** have a copy of the book, workbook, and handouts used for the class. It is difficult for a Deaf student to watch the interpreters and follow along in a book therefor the interpreters may have to indicate where in the book, workbook the class is presently reading. The book is a vital tool for preparation. You can use online / Apps translation software to make notes for yourself to aid your interpretation. (not for use during class but for preparation) Be wary of electronic generated translations because they can be FAR from accurate.

The interpreters need to discuss with the Deaf student about his / her decision to speak for themselves or will the interpreters need to speak the language being taught. If the interpreters will be speaking the language the instructor will need to know that any mispronunciations most probably will be the interpreters and not the students.

Having access to listening practices the students are required to do are very helpful in training the interpreters ear for the language and ability to correctly pronounce it. There are also some online resources that are more general but can be helpful.

Test taking can be a challenge for interpreters. Many courses incorporate listening passages to test student's ability to comprehend the language aurally. Explaining to the instructor that during a listening passage you will be transforming an oral test into a visual test and that the resulting grade will be heavily influenced by your ability in the language and not a true measure of the student's ability. I have experienced some instructors deciding to give the Deaf student a written passage as alternative testing.

Foreign language classes vary greatly in pace from slow repetitive simple vocabulary for elementary school classes to those designed to have participants become fluid speakers in a short time. The amount of preparation the interpreters will need varies according to the pace. If the instructional approach is total immersion the interpreters will need to have prior experience in the language. Ask the student if he / she understands the meaning of a word and ask which sign he / she wants used for the foreign word. The student may misunderstand and choose a sign that does not match the foreign word. Avoid correcting the student because part of an immersion approach is to learn from your own errors.

## **What competencies do interpreters needs to possess to successfully interpret a foreign language class?**

English Grammar:

Instruction in a foreign language may use comparative grammar between the target language and English. The interpreters must be well versed in English grammar rules and how to express them in sign to successfully make the instructors comparison meaningful. There is the added difficulty of expressing said comparison using a third language (ASL). Historically there have been several attempts to create a Visual Representation of English (VRE): SEE I, SEE II, Signed English, CASE, Cued Speech. Rarely is any one individual interpreter or individual Deaf person skilled in all VREs. Subsequently the interpreters and Deaf student will have to take time to communicate with each other about how grammar will be presented.

Clear and fluid Fingerspelling:

Many hearing people were taught to fingerspell by inexperienced people or books and thus tend to make hyperextended<sup>v</sup> hand shapes unlike the more ergonomic natural shapes Deaf people do. Ex: an E where the fingers are balled up tight and do not touch the thumb or where the thumb is hyperextended to touch all 4 fingers. During instruction it will become necessary for the interpreters to fingerspell an entire sentence or paragraph. Doing so without making errors or straining oneself is essential. Familiarity with the Rochester Method<sup>vi</sup> will be helpful only in as much as both the interpreters and Deaf participants

are both fluent in producing and receiving messages via the Rochester Method.

Some students benefit from speech reading. Interpreters will need to have some experience in oral transliteration as well as sign supported speech reading methods to accommodate the students learning style. Clear articulation, placing fingerspelling near your face, knowledge of what sounds are not visually detectable in speech reading and how to represent them, are but a few skills needed for this approach.

Linguistic ability:

Foreign language classes are taught by individuals who's L1 could be either the language being taught or English. (L1 = native language L2 = acquired language) There is debate as to whether an L1 or L2 is preferred. For further reading on this topic see; "Going beyond the Native Speaker in Language Teaching" <sup>vii</sup>. For the purposes of this article the challenges faced by the interpreters will vary depending if the instructor is L1 or L2. An L2 instructor may use more comparisons to English as discussed in the paragraph on English Grammar. An L1 instructor may have an accent when speaking English, may speak their L1 language faster than an L2 instructor. The interpreters will need a "good ear". Which is the ability to understand accents and not often struggle to figure out what was said.

All languages determine their visual representation of auditory information independently. (Letters attached to sounds) The interpreters must be able to break with English convention of letter sound pairings and

adapt to the spelling of the foreign language. Ex: Spanish LL represents a sound that is similar to the sound represented by a Y in English. The differences may or may not be directly taught. Hearing students can acquire this knowledge by listening, the Deaf / HH student may or may not be able to do so. As the interpreter you would know that implicit learning is taking place during the class and you may need to make the implicit, explicit.

Some interpreters contend that anyone interpreting in a foreign language class must be fluent in the three languages involved. I believe this is true if an interpreter is asked to interpret a class that requires students to have prior knowledge of the language. If all students are expected to have no prior knowledge of the language being taught and the interpreter is willing to put in the extra preparation necessary as well as possessing the competencies required to take on this kind of assignment then I feel it can be successful.

I would advocate for the interpreters to be paid for the substantial amount of prep time required just as theatrical interpreters are paid for their substantial preparations.

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[http://www.mla.org/2009\\_enrollmentsurvey](http://www.mla.org/2009_enrollmentsurvey) p19 of full report PDF

<sup>ii</sup> Omniglot

<http://www.omniglot.com/writing/index.htm>

<sup>iii</sup> Fingerspelling of other Languages Spanish,

<http://www.deafblind.com/spain.html>

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French,  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/French\\_manual\\_alphabet](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/French_manual_alphabet)  
German, <http://www.sign-lang.uni-hamburg.de/fa/>  
Italian,  
<http://www.istc.cnr.it/mostralis/eng/pannelo07.htm>  
Japanese, [http://www.kyoto-be.ne.jp/ed-center/gakko/jsl/zen\\_jsl04.htm](http://www.kyoto-be.ne.jp/ed-center/gakko/jsl/zen_jsl04.htm)  
Chinese, <http://www.spe-edu.net/shouyu/>  
<http://www.sinosplice.com/life/archives/2007/04/02/chinese-sign-language-fingerspelling>  
Arabic,  
<http://www.dd2000.4mg.com/alfab.htm>  
Russian,  
<http://www.deafblind.com/russima.html>  
Greek,  
<http://www.deafblind.com/grecema.htm>  
|  
Portuguese,  
<http://abcgestual.no.sapo.pt/D1.htm>  
Korean,  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Korean\\_manual\\_alphabet](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Korean_manual_alphabet)

<sup>iv</sup> Chinese

<http://www.chineselearner.com/pinyin/>

Korean

<http://www.lib.ucdavis.edu/dept/hss/e-asian/roman-mccune-korean.php>

<sup>v</sup> Hyperextension is the movement or extension of joints, tendons, or muscles beyond the normal limit or range of motion.

<sup>vi</sup> The Rochester Method is based on standard English. Each English word in a sentence is fingerspelled.

<sup>vii</sup> Going beyond the Native Speaker in Language Teaching

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