

## A Case Study of Two Sign Language Interpreters Working in Post-Secondary Education in New Zealand

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A case study of two qualified New Zealand Sign Language interpreters working in a post-secondary education setting in New Zealand was undertaken using both qualitative and quantitative methods. Educational sign language interpreting at the post-secondary level requires a different set of skills and is a reasonably new development in New Zealand. Consequently, there is little information about the experiences of sign language interpreters in post-secondary education. In this study, the participants reported on their own experiences and perceptions of working in this environment. Due to the lack of qualified and trained interpreters in New Zealand, there has not been any specific training for working at this level, and we believe there is a need to address this. This case study helps bridge the gap between theory and professional practice by providing some recommendations to assist post-secondary institutions in meeting their statutory obligations of ensuring equality in education for deaf students through appropriate support of their interpreters.

The importance of gaining a tertiary education has never been greater. Education beyond the secondary school level is crucial to people's ability to enter and successfully participate in the increasingly complex work environment of today. The number of students accessing post-secondary education in New Zealand has increased steadily over recent years, including deaf students who are now entering tertiary education in higher numbers than ever before. For the purpose of this case study, an upper case "D" has been used to refer to Deaf people who have a culture and language that are distinctive, and therefore identify with the Deaf community. The lower case "d" used in this indicates a broader definition, referring to all degrees of hearing loss, which may include people who are members of the Deaf community and those who are hard-of-hearing. With the advent of increased mainstreaming in primary and secondary schooling for most deaf students, the expectation of these students and their families is that they will be able to access post-secondary education in the same way as their hearing peers. As Ozolins and Bridge (1999) concluded, "probably no area in the life of deaf people has changed as radically as education" (p. 51).

### **Background**

The New Zealand Tertiary Education Commission (2010), while requiring post-secondary institutions to return data on the number of students accessing support services and identifying their disability category, do not actually collate this information. This means there is no definitive way of obtaining actual numbers of deaf students currently in post-secondary education. In 2006, the New Zealand Household and Disability Survey reported that 6,600 adults who identified as having a hearing "disability" were enrolled in formal education or training (Statistics New Zealand, 2006). However, just how many of these students would prefer that

access to lecture material be provided via a New Zealand sign language (NZSL) interpreter is unclear, although we do know that the demand for interpreters at this level is increasing (according to personal communications from various disability coordinators, 2009). In New Zealand, there is currently one training program for sign language interpreters, at Auckland University of Technology (AUT).

Reffell and McKee (2009) observed that although funding is available for interpreters in New Zealand tertiary institutions, the availability of this service is often compromised by a shortage of interpreters. This shortage is primarily due to the increase in demand for interpreters' services at the post-secondary level, as well as the limited availability of interpreters with the appropriate skill levels to work effectively in tertiary education settings. A number of researchers, both in New Zealand and overseas, have echoed this finding (Hyde et al., 2009; Knox, 2006; Komesaroff, 2005; Russell & Demko, 2006; Sameshima, 1999; Traynor & Harrington, 2003).

The researcher worked as a disability coordinator at a post-secondary institution for several years, and the issue of how best to support deaf students so they are able to achieve their entitlement to equal education is extremely pertinent. Recent inclusive education conferences have highlighted the fact that, for the majority of coordinators in New Zealand, supporting deaf students is a very real concern. The use of sign language interpreters is one of the ways institutions can support deaf students, but there is very little information about educational interpreting in New Zealand, and even less about the interpreters' own perceptions about the service they provide. Therefore, it is timely to identify the perceptions and experiences of sign language interpreters working at this level, as they are an important link to communication and information access for this particular group of students.

Although sign language interpreters have been working professionally in the United States and Britain for several decades, most of the research available relates to either linguistic aspects of sign language (Napier, 2001, 2004), or the process of interpreting in educational settings (Jones, 1997; Jones, Clark, & Stolz, 1997; Knox, 2006; Locker, 1990), or the physical injuries often suffered by interpreters (Stedt, 1990). Some literature identified how deaf students themselves perceive either the interpreters' skills or their own comprehension of signed information (Marschark, Sapere, Convertino, Seewagen, & Maltzen 2004; Napier & Barker, 2004). Students at a Queensland university mentioned interpreting as a support service they especially appreciated (Hyde et al., 2009). More recently, Powell (2011) recorded the learning and participation experiences of deaf students at polytechnics and universities in New Zealand, and 87% of the respondents who had used sign language interpreters as part of accessing their studies found the service very or extremely useful.

The literature search revealed that research on sign language interpreters' own experiences and perceptions is very sparse. Even though Metzger (1999) and Harvey (2003) did not specifically relate to interpreters in educational settings, these papers did address some of the matters surrounding working as an interpreter, such as neutrality, confidentiality, and the pitfalls of being "invisible." Two studies, both from Australia, dealt somewhat with the issues surrounding interpreting in educational settings (Bremner, Houston, & Sharples, 1996; Knuckey & Cumpston Bird, 2001) and suggested some recommendations for the future. As can be seen, understanding post-secondary education from sign language interpreters' perspective is lacking, and this gap in the knowledge is what this research attempts to address.

### The Case Study

Shulman (1996) referred to a case as being an account that enables a professional to reflect and learn from their experiences. The case in question is, "How two sign language interpreters perceive their experience of working in the post-secondary education sector in New Zealand?" It investigates a contemporary phenomenon in a real-life context. A case study should involve the in-depth study of a particular case, unique in its content or character, and it should seek to answer specific questions over a set period. Yin (2003a) referred to this as a bounded system. The uniqueness of each case is its purpose, rather than the production of generalizations.

Researchers classify case studies in a variety of ways. For Yin (1994), this case would be an empirical inquiry and is exploratory, as the existing knowledge

base is poor and does not lend itself to theoretical statements. It is a single-case holistic design and is acceptable in this situation as, while it is not revelatory, critical, or unique, it could be a prelude to further study and therefore appropriate. According to Stake (1995), this study would be deemed as an instrumental case study in that it is research into a particular situation in order to try to understand or gain insight into something else, namely, how to best support deaf students in the post-secondary sector. The case outlined also fits Shulman's (1996) case study proposal because it has: intention (a formal purpose; chance), is not controlled by the researcher, judgment (on the part of the researcher, as no one answer is available), and finally, reflection (examining the results in light of the judgment and producing a new plan or intention). Stenhouse (1985, as cited in Bassey, 1999) described an evaluative case study as one in which a single case or collection of cases is studied in depth with the purpose of providing educational decision makers with information that will help them judge the merit or worth of policies, programs or institutions.

Criticism of case study research has often been made because the findings are not generalizable, namely that  $n = 1$  (Bassey, 1999). Case study researchers have answered this claim by denying that the point is to generalize. Other researchers have responded by saying that the focus of case study research is the development and testing of theories (Gomm, Hammersley, & Foster, 2000). It is important that the danger of drawing general conclusions from a small number of cases not be ignored. Stake (1995) coined the term *naturalistic generalizations*, which allows the reader to feel as though they are experiencing the happening themselves. He believed that the case study researcher should aim to provide such an experience, which will allow the reader to come to their own generalizations about the material, rather than the researcher making those generalizations on the reader's behalf. This research endeavors to provide material that will already be familiar to its audience and enough raw data to allow the reader to consider their own conclusions. Both of these, Stake (1995) has posited, will assist in the validation of naturalistic generalization.

### Methods

#### Participants

The researcher approached two sign language interpreters working within the same post-secondary setting and invited them to participate in this study. Both had full time, fixed-term contracts. In New Zealand, this is an unusual situation as most interpreters are employed in a part time or freelance capacity.

Steven (names have been changed to protect identity) was in his sixth year of working as an interpreter, four with the same post-secondary institution. Prior to this, he worked as a sign language interpreter at a school for the deaf. Anne was in her second year of interpreting and started working at post-secondary level 2 months prior to this research. Previously, she had worked part-time for two agencies specifically designed for people who are deaf or who have disabilities.

This study was completed over a 4-week period. Prior to commencement, both participants were supplied with written information and an informed consent form. They were also given the opportunity to ask any questions prior to giving their consent. The researcher personally knew both interpreters; however, there was no conflict of interest, and the researcher was not in a position of power in relation to either the interpreters' work or personal lives.

### Measures

Using a mixed-methods design, quantitative and qualitative methods were applied in a manner that allowed the broader features of participants' experiences to be identified and examined. To enhance validation, multiple viewpoints, or triangulation, was used for greater accuracy of interpretation as each set of data may not be strong enough to support the findings on its own (Morse & Richards, 2002; Yin, 2003a, 2003b).

Initially, the researcher carried out a review of documents relating to sign language interpreting including the Sign Language Interpreters Association of New Zealand (SLIANZ, 2007) Code of Ethics and Conduct and a copy of the interpreters' university's Guidelines for Sign Language Interpreters. These were analyzed to gather background information and to inform the next phase of the research. Each participant was then asked to complete a brief individual written questionnaire, which contained both fixed-choice (quantitative) and open-ended (qualitative) questions. The fixed-choice questions gathered demographic data including age, gender, educational qualifications and interpreting experience. In addition, further fixed-choice questions gained the interpreters' impressions of how important certain issues, including elements related to career, and working relationships, were to them in this area of work using a 5-point scale: *not at all important*, *not very important*, *neutral*, *somewhat important*, or *very important*. Open-ended questions asked participants to describe the issues they had encountered in the postsecondary setting.

The researcher also carried out two direct observations of the interpreters working in a team situation in order to gain information about techniques and strategies used in (a) mass lecture situation and (b) a small tutorial group. An observation guide was

compiled ahead of time in which the various elements to be recorded in field notes were identified; prior research and knowledge of interpreters' code of ethics and experiences helped inform this process. The researcher recorded the frequency of those activities/interactions, such as asking for clarification, use of finger spelling, symbolic meanings and nonverbal communication, as well as tactics used by the interpreters to deal with unexpected vocabulary and inappropriate rate of lecture information.

Finally, an in-depth interview was conducted with both interpreters to allow them to expand on their perceptions of interpreting in the post-secondary education sector, and to explore and clarify any issues raised in the written responses, document review and observations. The complete interview was audiotaped and then transcribed and given to the participants for member checking as part of the validity process. Interviews and other data collection followed guidelines suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1990).

### Data Analysis

To analyze data contained within the written survey accurately, a coding manual was developed, assigning numerical values to various demographic and fixed-choice responses. This was a simple and consistent way of representing each variable and made entering them easier into the software SPSS for further analysis. In order to make sense of the material gathered via the document review, the observations and the interview data, a thematic analysis (TA) was undertaken (Stake, 1995; Strauss & Corbin 1990). Initial themes were identified for this study through inductive analysis, including the researcher's prior analysis of the literature regarding the experiences of sign language interpreters. Then a method of constant comparison, using open coding, to identify categories and concepts found in the data was used. The use of a software program, NVivo 9, assisted the qualitative data analysis. Once the data reached saturation point—when no new categories were being developed and no new ideas were forthcoming—generalizations were initiated and categorized regarding the experiences shared by participants.

### Results

From the written questionnaire both interpreters identified the following issues as very important: professional development; code of ethics; role confusion by others; the quality of preparation provided; teaming and supervision; lack of developed signs, jargon, and technical language. After exploring the two interpreters' experiences and perceptions of their roles as post-secondary sign language interpreters using both the written responses and the data obtained

via the in depth face-to-face interviews, two main categories emerged: (a) the nature of the sign language interpreting process at the post-secondary level, and (b) issues for sign language interpreters working in the post-secondary environment.

Post-secondary interpreting is very different from community interpreting. The nature of lecture styles means that the interpreter really needs to be familiar with the discourse environment and preferably have subject-specific knowledge. Additionally, the speed of information needing to be transmitted was an area that caused concern:

In community, it's a two-way thing and there's more time to be able to stop situations and sort things out quickly. [However], processing for lectures is quite different . . . there is a forced fast pace, you have less time to do the part that is processing, that is translating it to a more free interpretation. (Anne)

The nature of this kind of interpreting environment can lead to other issues that are discussed in the following section.

Both interpreters working in this environment have had experience with occupational overuse syndrome: "You come out, and you're physically very sore, your neck, your arms, your shoulders and your wrists might be bad, and mentally [pause] well your brain is just like mush and you can't cope after that" (Anne). One way of dealing with this was the practice of teaming, and given the speed and constant one-way nature and speed of lecture material, it provided some measure of protection. Teaming usually involves two interpreters rotating every 15-20 minutes to alleviate both the stress on the upper body and the "brain fade" that occurs if required to interpret high-level material for any length of time. Steven commented, "When I was first here I was getting stressed forearms mostly, now we team our one hour lectures and it makes a huge difference. Our quality is probably better too." These interpreters believe they are potentially at risk of needing to take some time out from the interpreting profession if they do not have the facility to team.

Steven illustrated the importance these interpreters placed on the amount of time allowed for preparation and the quality of what lecturers supplied to the interpreters ahead of the lecture: "Few people understand the time and effort involved to prepare well. Academics are usually the worst." The interpreters again reiterated that the main way to be able to perform at their best was via adequate preparation, provided well in advance:

I think lecturers can be quite possessive about their intellectual property. They don't want to give us

their notes and they don't understand that our ethics mean we're not going to hand them out. All we want is the information so we can do our job. We can give them back to you at the end! (Anne)

The interpreters felt this issue was probably the least understood of their needs and one that sometimes required specific intervention from the disability support services manager.

University lecturers often utilize subject specific terminology (jargon) that is crucial to the understanding of subject matter. It is imperative that deaf students are given access to jargon in the form in which it is delivered if they are to have appropriate access to the content of the lectures. During observations, the participants were observed using finger spelling, incorporating patterning as appropriate, as an effective way of conveying this information. For example, idiomatic English "in a nutshell" was finger spelled followed by a conceptually accurate translation of the meaning of the term. Again, preparation is important to allow interpreters to discuss how they will represent jargon and concepts prior to the lecture situation. Anne gave a very clear outline of these issues in her interview:

We sign the concept for like . . . hegemony. We'll sign dominant, and pedagogy. We'll sign "strategies of teaching," but that doesn't help the students when they read it. There's a bit of controversy involved as well as whether those signs should be developed by deaf or hearing or interpreters or whatever.

According to these interpreters, the ideal would be that signs should develop naturally through the Deaf community, but the fact that NZSL has not had a long history of being used at this level of education means that there is a large vocabulary/sign gap, which the interpreters and deaf students themselves are trying to fill.

Working as a sign language interpreter also posed some concerns about boundaries and the relationships that may develop between the interpreters and the students for whom they provide access. The SLIANZ (2007) Code of Ethics and the Guidelines for Sign Language Interpreters identified similar issues surrounding work in this type of environment, and while it provided clarification of the interpreter's role, there were clear difficulties translating these into reality, as Steven described:

It's following your ethics, of course, but you have to remember you're still a person and you're with these people every day so you can't go in there and be a conduit, be invisible, because the other students don't ignore you. I mean basically, you

have more than one role. You're not purely an interpreter; you are also a staff member of the institution so it can be very hard at times to juggle those roles.

This was a constant juggling act at times to try to get the balance of roles right, and these interpreters identified the potential for personal stress developing from such a working environment.

In the interview and the written questionnaire, the interpreters lamented the lack of specialization and postgraduate qualifications within the interpreting profession. Anne commented, "To be able to specialize your interpreting skills would be fantastic, but there just isn't [sic] enough of us to do that." Additionally there was the recognition that there was a lack of clear career progression, pay rates do not reflect skill level or experience, and job security was very poor. In addition, these interpreters believed that working with a more experienced interpreter, who could function as a mentor, would be a potential improvement to working conditions, as would be the provision of external supervision.

### Discussion

Educational interpreting at this level of education is increasing rapidly. No interpreter-training program focused at the post-secondary level exists in New Zealand, and therefore these interpreters are breaking new ground. The themes that emerged in this research highlight five central issues: (1) the uniqueness of post-secondary level educational interpreting, (2) the value of reflection on practice, (3) the strength of commitment to sign language interpreting, (4) the nature of sign language interpreters' professional identities and, (5) the usefulness of professional development.

There are concerns about sign language interpreters' ability to perform adequately in the post-secondary environment, NZSL's ability to cope with academic discourse and the speed of information transfer. There is further concern about the status of sign language interpreting as a profession, its career development and structure. The lack of mentoring and supervision was also a key aspect of job satisfaction for these participants.

The data collected shows that these particular sign language interpreters were working in less than ideal circumstances. The lack of policies and planning can often leave the sign language interpreter vulnerable to the whims of individual institutions. Institutions find it hard to recruit interpreters, and it is rare for them to be on staff as these two participants were at the time. Even though both were on staff, these interpreters identified the general lack of understanding from the institution about the need to team interpret lectures in order to

lessen the likelihood of occupational overuse problems occurring. Institutions seem to only see the cost of employing interpreters for teaming, and they object strongly to having to pay two people when they think one is sufficient.

Lang (2002) identified that many deaf students receive information via a third party, with little direct communication. Foster, Long, and Snell (1999) reported that, "[Instructors] generally indicated that they made few if any modifications for deaf students and saw support service faculty as responsible for the success or failure of these students" (p. 225). Knuckey and Cumpston Bird (2001) encapsulated the noteworthy issue relating to students who use interpreters, as well as the individual characteristics of the interpreters themselves, in this way:

Educating a Deaf person in a hearing context via an interpreter is unique. In no other educational setting are the concepts and the language of instruction, as well as classroom interaction, filtered through a third party who may or may not be familiar with the subject matter. (p. 24)

The ability to produce an accurate interpretation of the lecture material relates to several aspects. Firstly, the complexity of lecture information and related lexical and cognitive intricacies are a challenge for interpreters working at this level. Secondly, researchers suggest that the accuracy and effectiveness of interpreting at the post-secondary level may depend on the interpreter's familiarity with the subject material, their ability to code-switch between free and literal interpretation as determined by the content of the message and the needs of the student and their own level of education (Lang, 2002; Locker, 1990; Napier, 2001). In order to facilitate an accurate interpretation of their teaching material, lecturers need to have adequate deaf awareness to understand how to work successfully with an interpreter or how to find ways to enable the student to maximize any learning situation.

Developing appropriate teaching strategies such as (a) moderating the pace of speech, (b) writing key terms on the whiteboard to ensure correct finger spelling, and (c) pausing and allowing students time to look at PowerPoints or demonstrations, as deaf people cannot attend to two different visual stimuli at once, can all assist with better transmission of the lecture content. In addition, simply pausing after asking a question to a group can facilitate, and vastly improve, the inclusion of deaf students using interpreters as they often experienced processing time in receiving information. Further, the role and importance of the preparation provided by the lecturer or the department, in the form of lecture notes, PowerPoints and other background information to the interpreter cannot be overstated.

Such preparation needs to be available in a timely manner, well prior to the interpreting assignment, and this would help alleviate some of the content issues with which these interpreters struggled.

### **Implications and Recommendations**

Under the New Zealand Human Rights Act (New Zealand Parliamentary Counsel Office, 1993) and the United Nations (2008) Convention on the Rights of People with Disability deaf people have the right to access education. More security, knowledge, support and recognition of the job being undertaken by sign language interpreters in the post-secondary education sector is required so as they can assist access to higher education for those students who use sign language as a means of communication. If interpreters do not receive these, then post-secondary institutions are in danger of limiting deaf students' valid access to higher education. Ensuring interpreters' needs are being met will help to make this right more achievable.

The issues of professional development and networking need further attention if this profession is to grow and retain its graduates. Post-secondary institutions have a responsibility both to ensure that they only employ appropriately qualified and experienced interpreters and to support their on-going professional development to obtain appropriate post-graduate qualifications. There is an urgent need to increase the number of appropriately qualified interpreters available, and it would make sense to offer the current NZSL interpreter-training course in alternative formats such as modular blocks or parallel courses in regions, perhaps on a rotating basis. In addition, providing alternative accreditation pathways, such as are offered in Australia by the National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (NAATI, 2011), would be of benefit.

Further development of sign language interpreting as a profession needs to be considered. As noted in Roy (1993), most interpreter training programs focus on the "superficial aspects of the communication event which reinforce the notion that the interpreter's task is largely mechanical and that the interpreter's role in the event is passive" (p. 146). It would be beneficial if interpreter training incorporated a larger component of practical discourse analysis to enable interpreters to better understand and develop strategies for coping with the variety of discourses they will encounter at the post-secondary level.

There need to be clear pathways of career progression, and there would be some merit in developing a model for the training and employment of post-secondary education sign language interpreters. This would potentially improve educational access for deaf students and ensure more consistency throughout

post-secondary institutions in terms of the provision of quality interpreting services.

Finally, we must look at the implications for professional practice. Disability coordinators employ and oversee the day-to-day activities of sign language interpreters and interact with other post-secondary staff, specifically lecturers and tutors. Several things need to be considered in order to ensure highly qualified, professional interpreters are used in post-secondary education and that these interpreters find it rewarding enough to stay in the profession. Firstly, there is a need for a clearer understanding of what the sign language interpreting process actually entails. Many coordinators do not have the required knowledge to advocate successfully on behalf of the interpreters, or on behalf of the deaf students, they serve. Secondly, it requires coordinators to promote the interpreter's need for preparation and time to engage in further sign development with students and faculty.

To function effectively in the post-secondary setting critical skills need to be acquired with a layer of oversight, which includes the provision of mentoring and supervision, both of which are recognized means of accountability and support in many professions but largely absent in the sign language interpreting profession. Dean and Pollard (2001) stated that the lack of mentoring and supervision "endangers the size and stability of the already insufficient interpreter resource pool by failing to attend to the retention and early professional development of graduates" (p. 9). In addition, Heatherington (2012) argued for "the development of consultative supervision within the interpreting profession to reduce work-related stress, to provide interpreters with opportunities for regular examination of their practice, and to protect those to whom interpreters provide a service" (p.46). Clearly then this is an area that post-secondary interpreters need to have addressed and should form part of their employment agreement with the institutions they work for.

Alongside this, there should be some provision for academic staff training regarding the role and responsibilities of a sign language interpreter so that post-secondary institutions are better able to meet their statutory obligations under the various national laws and international treaties to which New Zealand is a signatory. Additionally, working within a supportive and knowledgeable team, ongoing professional development, job stability and career structure would also improve the job satisfaction and retention of interpreters working in this particular setting.

### **Conclusion**

Sign language interpreting at the post-secondary level is a high demand occupation that involves complex linguistic, environmental and intrapersonal factors.

Although the nature of the work cannot be easily changed, there are some things that faculty and the support service coordinators can do which may hold promise for the improvement of the interpreters' ability to perform at their best. By listening to sign language interpreters' stories, post-secondary institutions will be in a better position to provide an improved service for those students that depend on both interpreters and support services to ensure their access to education is equitable. Sign language interpreters are more than just a conduit: they are flesh and blood with human wants and needs. Their perceptions are important, as they give insight into the actual workings of a sign language interpreter's world, which in turn gives post-secondary institutions and their staff the opportunity to improve the quality of service they provide and become more knowledgeable and adept at meeting the needs of this particular group of learners.

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