

# Educational Interpreters and Early Childhood Development Training

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## Abstract

This article examines current standards for educational interpreters, specifically those working in the primary school setting. The author evaluated these standards and tried to find solutions that would help interpreters more effectively serve their deaf and hard of hearing consumers. Nida and Taber's (1969) definition of "dynamic equivalence" is used as the foundation of this paper and is considered alongside the current literature of early childhood development. The literature is summarized and applied in order to make a case for additional training that could improve interpreter effectiveness within this setting. Interpreters seeking to render dynamically equivalent interpretations need to have a more in-depth understanding of early childhood development in order to match the teaching goals of early childhood educators. Possible future requirements are suggested as well as further research opportunities that should be pursued in order to determine the effectiveness of this additional training in helping interpreters match the goals of early childhood educators.

## **Educational Interpreters and Early Childhood Development Training**

The implementation of Public Law 94-142 (the Education for all Handicapped Children Act of 1975) changed educational practices for deaf and hard of hearing students in the United States. The act, which was renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Act of 1990 and now called the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA), introduced the concept of “Least Restrictive Environment” (LRE). This part of the law mandated that children with disabilities should be educated alongside non-disabled children whenever possible. Therefore, the responsibility of educating deaf children was suddenly placed in the hands of K-12 local education agencies. This new focus on mainstreaming, or the practice of placing deaf and hard of hearing children in classrooms with their hearing peers, created an increased demand for educational interpreters (Jones, 2004). The education of deaf and hard of hearing children is further complicated by the fact that many of these interpreters never receive formal training in educational interpreting (Hurwitz, 1991). The accreditation standards of the Commission on Collegiate Interpreter Education (CCIE, 2014) explain that interpreter education programs (IEPs) must cover the protocols of the educational setting but do not specify any further training required in this specialization. This standard, in its current state, means that interpreting students can graduate from an IEP with little or no training to prepare them to work effectively as educational interpreters.

This article began as an exploration of this specific setting within the interpreting field. It was my belief that many educational interpreters are under-qualified and I wanted to examine the standards within the field to better understand current issues and concerns related to educational interpreting. A review of the literature revealed that there is no national standard for educational

interpreters and that each state has the power to decide what qualifications are required to work as an educational interpreter in the K-12 setting (Smith, 2013). This article focuses specifically on educational interpreters working in the primary school setting since children at that age are still acquiring and mastering language skills (Bloom, 1970; Bloom, 2000; Brown, 2000; Owens, 1996 as cited in Seal, 2004). Interpreters working in this setting can therefore have significant impact on these students' development and arguably must possess the skills necessary to facilitate linguistic, cognitive and academic development (Schick, 2004). Teachers working in the primary school setting have had extensive training and use special techniques to help shape the language development of their students (Eliason & Jenkins, 2008). If educational interpreters do not have extra training in early childhood development, they might not recognize these crucial elements in a teacher's lesson plan. Therefore, I propose educational interpreters in the primary school setting should be required to have additional training in early childhood development in order to meet the educational needs of their deaf and hard of hearing consumers.

### **Dynamic Equivalence**

Nida and Taber's concept of *dynamic equivalence* is essential to the hypothesis that interpreters need some form of training in early childhood development in order to interpret effectively within this setting. *Dynamic equivalence*, according to Nida and Taber (1969), is "defined in terms of the degree to which the receptors of the message in the receptor language respond to it in substantially the same manner as the receptors in the source language" (p. 24). This means that those receiving an interpretation should experience the message in the same way as an audience receiving the text in its original language. A dynamically equivalent interpretation will include the tone, meaning, impact and goal of the source message (Nida &

Taber, 1969). Goal is an especially important aspect to consider because teachers have specific goals during classroom instruction and educational interpreters must be able to recognize these moments. An effective interpreter will be able to create an interpretation that will impact the deaf student in the same manner as it would a hearing student. This concept is relevant to this discussion, because unless an interpretation meets these criteria, an equivalent education is not possible. Despite previous findings by Kurz (2004), a more recent study conducted by Marschark, Sapere, Convertino and Pelz (2008) indicated that direct and mediated instruction were equally effective under the conditions of their experiments. Presuming an equivalent education is possible; interpreters must do their part in order to provide their students with equal access to the instruction of the classroom. Research has shown that context and goals are both vital parts of communication, and that they affect the meaning of a message (Humphrey & Alcorn, 2007). Therefore, the content of a message alone is not a sufficient interpretation and an interpreter arguably needs to consider the goal of the teacher's utterances in order to provide the deaf student with the best possible access to the instructional intent of the classroom. With the concept of dynamic equivalence as a starting point, this article will summarize the literature related to early childhood development and language acquisition. As stated above, teachers use language with specific educational and developmental goals in mind. This article contends that interpreters must have not only linguistic competency but also some understanding of early childhood education techniques in order to render a dynamically equivalent interpretation.

### **The Complex Nature of Early Childhood Education**

Due to the brief nature of this article, it is impossible to fully explore all of the literature related to early childhood development and language acquisition. Instead, I analyze a few

examples that are especially relevant to this discussion. With each example, I discuss some of the possible considerations that must be made in order to render a dynamically equivalent interpretation. Possible ramifications for the deaf or hard of hearing child are also discussed.

One article of interest is a review of teaching strategies that early childhood educators employ in order to meet a variety of educational goals. The article, written by Dopyera and Dopyera (1992), has one particularly significant section that discusses the use of questions in the classroom setting. They reference Piaget and then expand on his ideas:

Questions were used extensively by Piaget and were considered by him to ‘constitute the fundamental factor in cognitive development’ (Piaget, 1977, p. 17). Questions, within the comprehension realm of the child, that create discrepancies, pose contradictions, and require a shifting of perspective would be expected to have maximal impact on children’s thinking and learning (p. 27).

Dopyera and Dopyera (1992) reference work by Piaget in order to highlight the importance of questions within classroom discourse. Sometimes, questions are used to create discrepancies in the child’s thinking process, which ultimately leads to a shift in perspective. This shift creates opportunities for cognitive development as the student incorporates the new information into their current knowledge of the world (Piaget, 1977). With this theory of cognitive development in mind, an interpreter would need to recognize how teachers incorporate this concept into their classrooms in order to render a dynamically equivalent interpretation. For example, if the teacher is seeking to “connect actions with events” using questions such as, *How did you do...?*, it is important that the interpreter structure the interpretation in a way that will allow the deaf student to independently make the connection between the event and the action (Dopyera & Dopyera, 1992, p.27). This specific example is fairly straightforward but is still

relevant to this discussion. If an interpreter leads with an example instead of leaving the question open-ended, the child arguably would not have the same cognitive growth opportunity as a hearing child.

Teachers also use a variety of teaching strategies to increase literacy. For example, in 1996 Petersen, an early childhood educator and advocate, wrote a guide that contains a section that discusses the importance of using different teaching strategies to increase literacy. She examines the importance of giving young children some of the words they need to describe their current situation. As an example, she describes how a teacher might introduce new scientific vocabulary: “Do you see the salt we put into the water? When we can’t see it anymore, it has disappeared into the water. We say it has dissolved” (Petersen, 1996, p. 146). In this situation, the teacher has provided a new vocabulary word to describe the science experiment conducted in class. This technique is different than the open-ended question technique as discussed by Dopyera and Dopyera. The goal of vocabulary building, in this instance, is important and the interpreter must recognize the teacher’s intention. If the interpreter merely signs DISSOLVED, the opportunity to teach the English word has been missed. Since learning the English word *dissolve* is important to the teacher’s goal, the interpreter could choose to sign and fingerspell the concept. Seal suggests several other techniques that could also be employed by interpreters working with textbook language, including spatial manipulations and synonyms marked to show the interchangeability of the English vocabulary. Any of these strategies would not only match the teacher’s goal but would help the student make connections between their signed language and the English language (Smith, 2013). The exact approach used by the interpreter is not important, but the ability for an interpreter to recognize the teacher’s goal is crucial. If the interpreter can identify different teaching strategies, he or she will be able to render

interpretations that reflect the original goal of the source language text, which is essential to the academic and linguistic development of the deaf child. Another issue that theorists have discussed is how teachers often model appropriate language use for the children in their classroom.

Two such theorists, Eliason and Jenkins, wrote a guide that covers a variety of topics including language development through the process of language modeling. In one section, they list different techniques that encourage language development. One suggestion states: “Recognize that grammatical errors, particularly verb and pronoun problems, are typical in the early childhood years. Rather than putting too much emphasis on exactness of speech, repeat the sentence to the child, using correct grammar so that the child hears the proper form.” (Eliason & Jenkins, 2008, pp. 195-196) This section, when applied to interpreting, is especially significant because interpreters must properly convey a student’s error and a teacher’s response in order to successfully facilitate the interpreted communication event. If the current goal for the student is to increase his or her English language development, then such situations must be interpreted in a way that allows this teaching moment to happen. If the interpreter corrects the grammar while interpreting into English, the moment will have been lost.

Another aspect to consider is that English is not the only language being acquired in the primary setting. According to Mitchell and Karchmer (2004 as cited in Smith, 2013), 92% of deaf students come from families with two hearing parents. This is problematic because it suggests that deaf children frequently do not have access to competent language models (Marschark, Lang, & Albertini, 2002). Therefore, it is important to consider that educational interpreters often take on the responsibility of modeling natural ASL for their deaf students. Smith’s (2013) study discusses this aspect of a classroom interpreter’s role. She questioned

Camie, the interpreter's pseudonym for the study, about her work as a classroom interpreter.

Camie explained that like hearing children, her deaf students are still acquiring skills in their first language. As a result, Camie reports the importance of modeling classifiers, non-manual markers and other features of ASL as naturally as possible (Smith, 2013). These two examples of language acquisition further emphasize the importance of exposing educational interpreters to early education practices in order to ensure that deaf students have access to the instructional intent of the classroom. Since linguistic development is an essential function in the primary setting (Seal, 2004), it is important that interpreters are able to recognize the specific teaching techniques that pursue this goal. Without this understanding, an interpreter might simply correct the grammar of a student in order to facilitate communication. The opportunity for linguistic modeling will have been lost and could have further implications on the student's development. (Schick, 2004; Smith, 2013)

The previous three examples have touched on the complex nature of early childhood education. With this in mind, we must consider what minimal competencies should be required for educational interpreters. Early childhood educators have undergone years of training and supervision in order to ensure that they are qualified to facilitate maximal development in students (Eliason & Jenkins, 2008). Interpreters must have not only the language flexibility indicated by high EIPA (Educational Interpreters Performance Assessment) scores but also some basic understanding of early childhood development in order to provide the deaf and hard of hearing students access to a quality education. The EIPA is an assessment used to evaluate an interpreter's competencies within the educational setting (Schick & Williams, 1992). The next section briefly examines the EIPA and explains how this test can be used to successfully evaluate an interpreter's performance in an educational setting. Immediately thereafter, a case study of an

interpreter who has a strong understanding of early childhood development is discussed. Her background is one example of how this knowledge can have a positive impact on the education of a deaf or hard of hearing child (Smith, 2013).

### **Profile of the EIPA**

Schick and Williams (2004) wrote an article summarizing the EIPA and evaluated its effectiveness. They argue that the EIPA is a successful means of measuring interpreter competencies because it uses real life classroom interactions that include, among other things, errors in signing. This article will briefly summarize the competencies of an interpreter with a score of 3.0 out of 5.0, which is not, as I will argue, a high enough score to effectively work with young children. The profile of an intermediate, 3.0, interpreter is as follows:

Individual is able to sign in a fairly fluent manner using some consistent prosody, but pacing is still slow with infrequent pauses for vocabulary or complex structures....grammatical production may still be incorrect...voiced translation often lacks depth and subtleties of the original message...may incorrectly interpret complex information...an interpreter at this level needs continued supervision and should be required to participate in continuing education in interpreting (p. 203).

Based on the above profile, an interpreter that receives a 3.0 score is likely not prepared to work in the primary setting. His or her grammatical production errors would make it difficult for the interpreter to properly model natural ASL sentence structure, which this article has identified as one important skill for employment in this setting (Smith, 2013). Additionally, if the interpreter struggles to capture nuance while interpreting into English, it is likely that the teacher will not be able to properly identify opportunities for linguistic and academic

development. Most states now require a score of 3.5 or higher, but even an interpreter with a score of 4.0 might struggle with rapid turn-taking and complex topics (Schick & Williams, 2004). Both rapid turn-taking and complex topics occur within classroom discourse, which suggests a high EIPA score should be considered necessary to work within the educational setting (Smith, 2013; Winston, 2004). The profile of an advanced intermediate interpreter, 4.0, is as follows:

Demonstrates broad use of vocabulary with sign production that is generally correct. Demonstrates good strategies for conveying information when a specific sign is not in her/his vocabulary. Grammatical constructions are generally clear and consistent, but complex information may still pose occasional problems. Prosody is good, with appropriate facial expression most of the time. May still have difficulty with the use of facial expression in complex sentences and adverbial non-manual markers. Fluency may deteriorate when rate or complexity of communication increases. Uses space consistently most of the time, but complex constructions or extended use of discourse cohesion may still pose problems. Comprehension of most signed messages at a normal rate is good but translation may lack some complexity of the original message. An individual at this level would be able to convey much of the classroom content but may have difficulty with complex topics or rapid turn taking (Schick & Williams, 2004, p. 203).

Based on the above profile, an interpreter with a score of 4.0 is likely qualified to work in the primary setting. An interpreter at this level has a broad use of vocabulary, consistently uses grammar correctly and can incorporate linguistic features of ASL (Schick & Williams, 2004). All of these skills have been identified as important to interpreters working in the primary setting

(Smith, 2013). Interpreters scoring above this level will likely be flexible enough in their language use to understand and interpret the nuances of a teacher working in the primary setting.

The EIPA is mentioned in this article because it has proved effective in measuring the competencies of educational interpreters (Schick & Williams, 2004). One relevant aspect to consider is that some states do not require a score specific to the setting of actual employment. For example, Illinois law requires an educational interpreter to have a score of 3.5 or higher but the code does not specify that the score must have been earned in the actual setting of employment (68 Ill. Admin. Code §1515.50). Therefore, an interpreter could take the secondary setting test and use that score to apply for a job in a primary classroom. This is problematic because primary and secondary classrooms require different skill sets (Seal, 2004). Therefore, it would seem preferable for an interpreter to take the EIPA for the setting in which he or she will actually be employed. The EIPA serves as an effective means of measuring an interpreter's competency in an educational setting but further training could prove beneficial. Continuing Education Units (CEUs) or classes related to early childhood development could further strengthen an educational interpreter's work as is discussed in the final section of this article.

### **Early Childhood Development Training for Interpreters**

Smith's (2013) book includes a study of several educational interpreters. She uses the work of these interpreters to draw conclusions about the complex nature of classroom interpreting. This article will specifically focus on one interpreter who seemingly has a good foundational knowledge of teaching goals and an interpreter's role in communicating an equivalent message. This interpreter's work lends support to the hypothesis that some knowledge of early childhood development will be beneficial to the success of a deaf or hard of hearing child's education.

The interpreter of interest, who was given the pseudonym AJ, was responsible for interpreting a classroom discussion on homophones. At one point during the lecture the teacher asked for the definition of “seem”. Smith (2013) analyzed the situation:

Because the point of the question was to determine if students knew the definition of the word *seem*, AJ did not give away the answer by using the sign for SEEM. Instead, she fingerspelled. In this manner, Angelina was able to access the English terminology that was fundamental to the current task and had the same opportunity as her classmates to respond to the question (p. 123).

This example clearly highlights the importance of having some background in early childhood development as it is applied in the classroom. AJ, possibly as a result of her background, was able to clearly identify the teacher’s goal in this instance. Upon this recognition, she was able to construct an interpretation that would provide her student with the same opportunity for linguistic development as the student’s hearing peers. She may not have been able to do this if she did not have a strong understanding of educational practices as they relate to children in the primary setting. An additional example in Smith’s work (2013), involves AJ’s decision to give direct feedback to her student. She discusses the importance of what she terms “I-R-E (initiation, response and evaluation)” within classroom discourse. I-R-E refers to situations in which teachers initiate questions, wait for a response and then evaluate the response by providing feedback. AJ sometimes chose to give direct feedback to her student in instances where the teacher did not. She felt this was justified because she believed each step of the I-R-E discourse chain was important for the student’s development (2013). By providing additional feedback, she was able to create an equivalent academic experience. AJ’s understanding of

classroom discourse likely helped her create dynamically equivalent interpretations and experiences that reflected the teacher's goals.

Smith (2013) provides background information on all of the interpreters involved in the study. AJ "earned two graduate degrees, including an Educational Specialist degree, and had completed some doctoral coursework in educational technology" (p. 59). While a graduate degree in education may not be required for every interpreter working in educational settings, it clearly provided AJ a range of supplementary skills to use in her interpreting work. There are several examples throughout the book of her adept skill at understanding the goals of the teacher and interpreting in a way that meets these goals. AJ serves as a clear example of how some background knowledge in education can be beneficial for educational interpreters working in the primary school setting.

The idea that educational interpreters could benefit from childhood development training is not a new concept. Seal (2004) cites work by other theorists that explains that some IEPs even require a course in child development. She writes that programs frequently require their students to take a course in child development (Dahl & Wilcox, 1990; Shroyer & Compton, 1994) but adds that "a single course may not provide the educational interpreter with sufficient knowledge of language development" (2004, p. 51), which is an essential function of interpreters working in this setting (2004). The very fact that some programs require a course in child development is telling of an understanding among educators that such a practice may be beneficial. In the conclusion of this article, I suggest possible future requirements for interpreters working in the primary setting, although more research needs to be conducted.

## **Conclusions**

This article has demonstrated that educational interpreters in primary settings could benefit from additional training in early childhood development. Teaching is a complex process and interpreters should have some understanding of educational goals in order to provide dynamically equivalent interpretations. Without some form of training in early childhood development, interpreters may overlook important aspects of a teacher's language use. Teachers use language to meet specific educational goals and an interpreter must be able to recognize these choices in order to render a dynamically equivalent interpretation. The case study of AJ by Smith (2013) is just one example of how a background in childhood development can aid an interpreter in facilitating a functionally equivalent educational experience. Educational interpreters that are certified through RID, the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, are required to earn 80 hours of continuing education units (CEUs) per four-year cycle in order to maintain certification. RID requires interpreters to pursue these professional development opportunities in order to ensure the continued quality of RID certified interpreters ("Certification Maintenance Program", n.d.). Since it is likely that educational interpreters in the primary setting could benefit from additional training in early childhood development, a certain number of CEUs during every cycle period should be focused specifically on this area of study. This would help educational interpreters working in the primary setting better understand the teacher's academic goals. Interpreters with a more in-depth understanding of early childhood education would likely be able to create a dynamically equivalent interpretation because they would understand how to incorporate the goals of the source message. In conjunction, states should require higher scores on the EIPA because an interpreter without high level language skills will likely be unable to effectively interpret complex educational goals without the language competencies required for such nuance. As students in primary and secondary settings have different needs (Seal, 2004),

interpreters should be required to have a score in the actual setting in which he or she works. It is important that interpreters be tested on the specific skill sets required for each educational setting. In terms of the additional training required in early childhood development, a national standard should be developed. Determining the amount of training in childhood development needed is beyond the scope of this article. One possible approach to finding a quantifiable minimal requirement would be a study that compared interpreters with and without training in early childhood development. While a comparative study of this nature would present numerous challenging aspects, it could shed some light on the usefulness of additional training in early childhood education. If it is determined useful, their training could be evaluated to determine a future standard for educational interpreters. The solution could be as simple as requiring a certain number of CEUs per cycle dedicated to training in early childhood development. It is my hope that educational interpreting in the primary school setting will become further specialized and that additional training in early childhood development will be one requirement of working within this specialization.

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