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# The Unheard Voice in Higher Education: Research on Deaf Students and Irish Sign Language Interpreting in Higher Education

I would like you to imagine you are studying in a university where the language used is not your first language. You have an interpreter to support you in your studies. You have been told you have to do a presentation, which is worth 40% of your grade, in front of your lecturer and your 100 classmates. You spend weeks preparing your PowerPoint presentation, you have practiced in front of the mirror, you have made notes to prompt you as each slide changes, you've chosen your outfit and you are ready!

On the morning of the presentation, you arrive in the classroom early and sit down to mentally prepare yourself but at the same time you are watching the door every time it opens.... Your heart starts to beat faster and faster as every time you look down to check the time, it gets closer to 10am... The lecturer walks in and you are frantically looking around, you are no longer mentally preparing yourself for this presentation, instead you are wondering how you are going to present to the audience. So many thoughts are running through your head, worry, fear, upset, embarrassment, awkwardness and 'what am I going to do?'...

The lecturer points at you, which means your time has come. You walk up to the front of the classroom, trying to communicate with the lecturer in gestures to say that the interpreter had not arrived. Your lecturer looks taken aback, doesn't know what to do and neither do you so you decide to show your presentation by just pressing the 'next' button on the slides. You stand awkwardly beside the computer while you notice a few students trying to stifle their laughter in the room. At the end of your presentation you just want the ground to swallow you up right there and then.

Unfortunately this is not a possible nightmare scenario but a reality; it has actually happened in real life to a Deaf friend of mine who uses Irish Sign Language (ISL). My Deaf friend was somewhat 'lucky', no marks were deducted, instead the lecturer arranged to meet with them one-to-one, with an interpreter, to go through their presentation as they would have done on that day. This story is just one of many reasons why I decided to undertake research into Deaf people's experiences of using ISL interpreters in higher education (McGrotty, 2016). I began to think about how these peripheral issues, unconnected but essential for the Deaf person, such as the skill level of interpreters, would have an impact on a Deaf person's learning and their overall academic attainment. While there have been a number of studies done on the process of educational interpreting in general internationally and nationally, a significant gap in empirical research of Deaf people's perspective of using educational interpreters in Ireland was identified.

**Author Note: Throughout this article, I will refer to Deaf people with a capital D to represent those who view themselves as a cultural linguistic minority and predominately use Irish Sign Language.**

## The Irish Context

There is significant under-representation of those who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing (D/HH) accessing higher

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education with statistics suggesting that they are nearly ten times less likely to obtain a third level qualification (CSO, 2012; Leeson, 2012). Both the Higher Education Authority and AHEAD have expressed concerns on the participation rates of D/HH in several reports with the HEA establishing specific targets for the enrolment of D/HH students (HEA 2015; AHEAD 2015). However it is not clear from these reports or the statistics provided by the CSO how many D/HH people use ISL as their primary language when accessing higher education, though AHEAD has mentioned ISL interpreters are included as part of the support services.

In relation to ISL interpreting provision within higher education, the Fund for Students with Disabilities covers full-time, registered students for academic contact hours only. The Fund does not include additional services a student may utilise such as tutorials, workshops within the learning development centres, clubs and societies, counselling services, etc. (Leeson, 2010; 2012; HEA, 2014). It is also worthwhile to mention that Ireland has only seen a continuing expansion of trained interpreters due to the establishment of the Centre for Deaf Studies in 2001 where the first cohort graduated in 2003. There are now over 100 trained interpreters in Ireland (Leeson, Saeed, & Grehan, 2015) however it is estimated only 75-80 of these are actively working and not all of them are full time.

## Mediated Learning – where do the gaps lie?

A Deaf student, who uses an ISL interpreter, relies on what is called 'mediated learning'; they are not learning directly from the lecturer but learning from the interpreter to access course material, academic language and the full curriculum. It has been highlighted in research that Deaf students comprehend on average 60-65% of an interpreted lecture compared to 85-90% of their hearing peers (Marschark et al., 2005; Napier & Leeson, 2015).

If we consider why there can be almost a 30% gap in comprehension between a Deaf and a hearing student even when using a highly-skilled and experienced interpreter, it's important to look at the classroom environment and other impacting factors. For example, the classroom itself may not be set up in such a way where the interpreter can hear everybody in the room, particularly if the lecture contains classroom discussion. Classroom discussion often occurs at a rapid rate, topics can change frequently which can increase the lag times for the interpreter so sometimes the interpreter may choose to omit some information to try to 'catch up'. Another aspect is the register in which a person is speaking, i.e. whether they use formal language or slang. Sometimes there may not be separate signs for words that mean the same thing, for example; 'father' and 'dad'. Both of these words mean the same thing and have the same sign but to a hearing audience they carry a different message and tone.

This leads into another impacting factor, where the educational background or subject-knowledge of the interpreter can influence linguistic decisions in terms of their vocabulary choice and what interpretation approach they will use (Napier & Barker, 2004; Schick et al., 2006; Berge & Thomassen, 2016). Let's say, an interpreter encounters a new word which may have been used for the first time in the course; they may decide to fingerspell the word on its own or they may decide to do a combination of both fingerspelling the word and do a free interpretation of that word or simply use a sign in the wrong context which may lack meaning (Russell & Winston, 2014).

An example would be the word 'liberal', in the context of equality. There is no specific sign in ISL for that particular word with that particular meaning, so an ISL interpreter may choose to fingerspell this word on its own or substitute another sign, for example, 'free' to represent the word 'liberal'. However, the ISL interpreter should consider whether the consequences of adopting a substitution approach is appropriate without informing the Deaf student of their decision. A skilled interpreter will usually adopt both strategies, fingerspelling 'liberal' alongside the

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substitution to give clarity and more meaning to the Deaf student.

## Research Method and Participant Profile

Undertaking this research, I opted for an anonymous online semi-structured survey using a mixture of both quantitative and qualitative questions. There were 3 sections to the survey which looked at the

1. Availability of Interpreters;
2. Interpreter Quality and Understanding; and
3. General Comments & Feedback.

For the purpose of this article, I will focus mostly on Section 3 which I believe will be of most value to you, the reader.

My target audience for this research was Deaf people who attended and used ISL interpreters within higher education between the years 2005 – 2015. A total of 31 Deaf people responded to my survey however 27 were used for comparison and analysis.

89% of respondents had never used an ISL interpreter in primary or secondary education.

I know personally, that for many Deaf students, their first time using ISL interpreters may be on the very first day of their higher education journey. For anyone who is 18 or 19 entering higher education after they leave school, it can all feel a bit daunting, you don't know what to expect and you can get a bit lost. For Deaf students, it's the same, except they have this interpreter who is going to be there with them on a daily basis. They may never have used an interpreter before, so they may know not the 'rules' or 'etiquette' in using an interpreter. They may look at the interpreter as being the expert.

74% of respondents had an ISL interpreter whilst 26% stated they only needed an ISL interpreter for some modules.

The good news here is that Deaf people had the option of having full time access to interpreters however 26% indicated they only needed them for some modules. Whilst the survey didn't allow for elaboration, it can be assumed that for certain modules, interpreters may have not been required. For example, lab work, placement or courses that would have technical or practical work built into the course.

## The Importance of having ISL Interpreters

Parts of my survey looked at what respondents felt about if having a regular interpreter, the same individual interpreters throughout their course, was important and around punctuality of ISL interpreters.

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93% of respondents stated it was important to have regular interpreters.

These respondents highlighted that having regular interpreters would lead to the interpreters becoming familiar with course content, decreasing the time lags and eliminating the need for the student to prepare the interpreter by giving background and context before the lecture. Regular interpreters would mean they could become familiar with individuals in the classroom and refer to them by names and pointing, reference to previous lectures or topics from weeks/months prior.

Quite a number of respondents also stated that they would create their own signs for certain vocabulary between themselves and the interpreter that would only be used within the classroom.

It really helped using the same interpreter, we agreed on common signs early on, this saved having to explain again and again to new interpreters.

In relation to punctuality or non-attendance of ISL interpreters, the majority of respondents stated they did not have any major issues as replacements were sought and in one case the missed hours were transferred to tutorial hours. For those who did experience issues with punctuality, they reported it to the Disability/Access Office or else raised it directly with the interpreter.

However, if the interpreter was unable attend and informed the student in advance, respondents said they chose to stay at home and did not attend lectures that day. If we think about this in terms of where the student could have up to 4 or 5 different modules on a particularly full scheduled day, this could have consequences going forward. The student may have missed out important information which could relate to procedures or topics that may appear on exams or assessments.

If Deaf students weren't informed in advance, they stated that they stayed in the classroom until they found an appropriate time to leave. What was interesting to note from the research is that four respondents all used the terms 'awkward' or 'embarrassed' when giving their responses. These terms have a negative connotation attached to it which can further contribute to the already prevalent social isolation of Deaf students in a mainstream setting (Oliva, 2004; Leeson, 2012).

sometimes I found out in the class meaning I was stuck throughout the class with no clue of what the lecture was about, then if it was question time or group discussion, it was even more awkward for me with no idea!

A replacement....came 40 minutes late ([they] forgot about it until I text [them]). Of course I was embarrassed but stayed.

63% of respondents stated that Trust & Confidentiality was the most important attribute of working with an

Generally respondents were positive in giving their overall experience of using ISL interpreters and how they felt 'fortunate' to have the opportunity to be educated through their own language, ISL. They were, in time, able to recognise the differences in having skilled and experienced interpreters in comparison with those who are newly qualified. They acknowledged the value of building a relationship with a particular interpreter where they were able to create and establish new signs to be used within the classroom.

## The Role of Disability/Access Office

Almost half of respondents said they did not give feedback or have a review of their experiences and would have liked the opportunity to do so, whereas others stated they did give feedback but it's unclear from the respondents as to how this review was structured or whether it was on an annual basis. Two respondents did note however, that when they raised a complaint, their identities were revealed to the ISL interpreters which created 'bad feelings' and 'awkwardness' throughout the rest of their course as they had to continue to use these specific ISL interpreters. The majority felt that it was the responsibility of the Disability/Access Office to resolve any issues surrounding ISL interpreter. However, they found at times, the Disability/Access Office could lack awareness in understanding the complaints, qualities and a preference for a particular ISL interpreter.

Most Disability/Access Offices do operate an open-door policy whereby students can arrange to meet to discuss issues at any stage throughout their higher education journey, however as my research identified that 89% never used an educational interpreter before, they may be unsure of what the protocols are. Upon further analysis, it became apparent that there may be a lack of clarity or awareness of each of the stakeholder's roles and responsibilities, both of themselves and of others.

1. Disability / Access Office
2. Deaf Student
3. ISL Interpreter
4. Faculty Staff
5. Agency

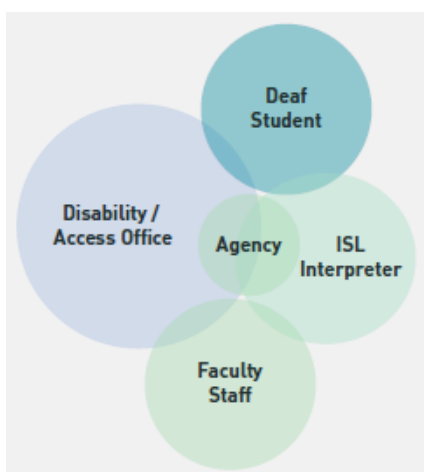


Figure 1: The Current Relationship between Stakeholders

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The stakeholders in this are; the Deaf student, ISL interpreter, faculty staff, Disability/Access Office and the interpreting agency. Currently, it seems that the Disability/Access Office is the 'locus of control' where they are the ones who have direct relationship with each of the stakeholders regarding the provision of ISL interpreting.

However it's important to remember that not all relationships carry the same weight. For example, the relationship and contact between the Disability Office and faculty staff may only be very brief, and at the start of the year, outlining any accommodations the Deaf student needs, such as ISL interpreter or notes in advance. The relationship between the Disability/Access Office and the ISL interpreter with the agency may be purely administrative.

1. Deaf Student
2. ISL Interpreter
3. Agency/ Faculty Staff
4. Disability/ Access Office



Figure 2: Student- Centric Relationship Model

Instead, the relationship between the Deaf student and the ISL interpreter is a working one and it constantly changes and evolves, therefore they should be the 'locus of control' in relation to their support, making it student-centric.

## A Message from Deaf Students...

I asked students if they were starting their higher education journey again, what three key pieces of advice they would give to themselves when using and working with an ISL interpreter. There were a lot of overlaps in this section where I condensed the information into four key areas:

1. Ensuring an efficient working relationship between the Deaf student and ISL interpreter by both stakeholders meeting prior to the academic year commencing to discuss, prepare and agree signs for any subject-specific terminology relevant to their course.
2. Regular, scheduled feedback with regards to the ISL interpreter's performance or any other issues that need to be addressed such as punctuality or signing styles. This feedback should be given to the Disability/Access Office who then liaises with the ISL interpreter or interpreting agency.
3. Deaf students would like to give a list of their preferred ISL interpreters to the Disability/Access Office or the

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- possibility of meeting and 'interviewing' the interpreters to assess whether they were a suitable match.
4. Having two ISL interpreters working together in the event of one ISL interpreter being absent or having alternative supports being arranged in the case of no ISL interpreters, for example, a note-taker or a stenographer.

## Conclusion

It is clear from my research there has been an increase in the number of Deaf people accessing higher education over the past ten years alone, in fact, the numbers have increased threefold compared to previous research conducted by Matthews (1996) and Conama and Grehan (2002). In previous research, respondents stressed frustration over the lack of provision of ISL interpreters in higher education yet all respondents in this survey were able to avail of ISL interpreters which means that it no longer presents as a barrier. This is largely down to increased numbers of trained ISL interpreters since the establishment of the Centre for Deaf Studies in 2001 and a more streamlined process whereby a student must register with the Disability/Access Office who will then in turn apply to the Fund for Students with Disabilities. **The focus has now shifted away from access, to the relationship and skills of the ISL interpreter.**

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