

The rise, fall, re-invention and normalisation of the Communicator

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a call to pragmatism over the normalisation of the role of Communication Support Workers in the British education system.

IN EVERY STAGE OF MAINSTREAM EDUCATION IN BRITAIN, DEAF STUDENTS ARE PROVIDED WITH ACCESS TO THE CURRICULUM BY PEOPLE WHO HAVE NOT RECEIVED ANY FORMAL INTERPRETER TRAINING. They are not qualified interpreters, and those who are critical of this provision state that such people should not ‘practice on Deaf people’ in order to get experience on the way to becoming qualified interpreters. The interpretation of education for Deaf students of all ages *should* be performed by those who have the highest language and interpreting skills, so why is this not the case?

Background, from early years up.

One of the most important periods for a Deaf child to be in contact with a communication professional is in the primary school room. This is partly because many Deaf children begin acquiring their language at that late stage. The underlying reason for that is that 90% of Deaf children are born to hearing parents. This statistic has profound implications and is compounded by a misinformed parental choice, which means that sign language is not seriously attempted before the child passes through the mainstream primary school gates. That common mistake may mean that much of the critical period for acquiring a language is missed. Linguists argue that a critical period for language acquisition begins in early infancy and ends around puberty (Carey and Gelman 1991). Parents fail to understand that for Deaf children, language acquisition can be as natural a process as hearing children, and that it is vital that the Deaf child is exposed to a natural shared modality of language as early as possible. For Deaf children to develop sign language they must be in constant contact with a competent sign language user. It is a calamity therefore, that many Deaf children experience a triple disadvantage: parents do not attempt to use sign language; the vital period for acquiring language is missed; then upon arrival at primary school the child comes face to face with a communication worker without the skills or knowledge to properly execute the task. The baton is passed along. The child’s natural language is withheld at every turn. Motivation for the child is low, the act of communication itself is unappetising, the learning process is profoundly affected and the education of the whole person is wounded. Should a worthy study be conducted of personnel who support reception classes, the results would be interesting because it is

common knowledge that learning support assistants with little or no signing skills are routinely given the task of supporting Deaf children. It may be routine at that stage simply because an individual *statement of needs* has had no time to come to light and therefore no funding is in place.

The communication worker may smile at the child with every intention to perform the task to the best of her ability, but she may not have the proper tools available. The missing tools primarily include a fluency and competency in their shared language, but must also include an awareness of a range of other more theoretical tools. These include an understanding of the dependant/dominant relationship that the child will experience and have to cope with through life because of deafness. The responsibility to ensure that the child is able to cope with that future relationship positively may be on the shoulders of the first encountered communication worker. Other tools include cultural advocacy, promotion of independence, language training within the interpreted interaction, training of the child on how to work with interpreters for life, sign vocabulary negotiation skills and pastoral issues which include admonition, encouragement and praise. The communication worker must also be aware of how a Deaf child acquires written language, because that will impact on how education may be more readily assimilated. The need to commission a professional who can readily use all those tools is profoundly important. That aspiration however, is naive, because reality militates against it. Schick et al. (1999) examined interpreters' skills in American K-12 educational settings. They found that less than half of the interpreters evaluated performed at a level considered minimally acceptable for educational interpreting. Again, should a worthy study be conducted in Britain, the results would make interesting reading. This is because the routes for training and qualification are different in Britain, and by far the majority of the interpreting undertaken in the British education system is done by people who are not qualified to interpret.

We could follow the Deaf child through the grades and observe the whole person developing. The child is building a wall of knowledge. Each brick represents a concept or a word or a chunk of meaning. The cement is a mix of teachers, peers and communication professionals (without whom little communication takes place). As the child progresses into adolescence, it becomes clear that there are gaps in the wall,

many near the base. Important vocabulary and information are missing. The missing bricks make the wall weaker, and will compromise the load-bearing strength needed later for the weightier academic concepts at university. Much of the communication support at university level therefore, becomes reparational.

Criteria for appropriate classroom support.

Whether or not the student has access to such an appropriate communication professional is often determined by the following words: *Reasonable adjustment*. With training, equipment, strategies and support staff in place, nearly all Deaf children are placed in mainstream schooling with the misconception that inclusion has occurred. True inclusion however, is a myth, because not all barriers are removed and the children do not have the same educational experience as all the other children in their local school. This is because the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act, and educational amendments to the Disability Discrimination Act contain concepts that require interpretation, such as *reasonable adjustments*, *reasonable steps*, *substantial disadvantage*, *reasonableness* etc. Decisions therefore must be made about how much adjustment is done to include the Deaf student. These decisions are often made around the Bursar's desk, because the question is asked, "How much will it *reasonably* cost?" Skilful financial interpretation of that criteria means that employing the services of a lesser-qualified language professional is deemed a reasonable provision. In addition to that response is the medical assumption of the statutory definition of disability which impacts on the achievement of equality (Woodhams and Corby 2003). Such an assumption will result in an attempt to repair the communication breakdown presented by the medical loss of hearing but will ignore the needs of the whole person.

Hand in hand with those interpretations of 'reasonable adjustment' is the attitude of those who have the responsibility of putting the provision in place. The child of primary school age is not as vociferous as a student at university. Such a student will know his or her rights and will be able to campaign, from experience and knowledge, with the aim to gain access to an appropriate level of language support. The primary school Deaf child is entirely in the hands of those adults who will decide on a course of action without consultation with the object of their discussion. Those adults may

not know the importance of appropriate language support and may be tempted to go along with the budgetary/medical view.

Availability of appropriate classroom support.

The blame however, does not remain exclusively with those who have a financial or medical agenda and are unaware of the issues. Should an informed search be made for an appropriate communication professional, there may be disappointment because they are in short supply. A significant scarcity of qualified sign language interpreters has occurred simply because mainstream placement has become the principal method of educating Deaf students (Marschark et al, 2005). In addition to that, there are many qualified interpreters who have the necessary skills and theoretical tools to work with students in education, but they simply do not have the inclination. A brief search of the Association of Sign Language Interpreters (ASLI) website reveals that 330 fully registered interpreters working in England, Wales and Northern Ireland have listed education as a domain in which they *potentially* work. Contrast that statistic with the National Deaf Children's Society (NDCS) uncorroborated statement that there are 35,000 deaf children in the UK and that three more are born deaf every day. Laying the fine points to one side, the statistics simply do not add up. It seems almost futile to suggest therefore, that the most skilled should work with those who would benefit most from access to those skills.

Many interpreters would agree with that concept, but are unwilling to put the theory into personal practice. There are many reasons for this reticence. One is that educational assignments generally pay less than other assignments. Anecdotal evidence is easy to glean from recruitment advertisements. Because a nationally accepted pay scale remains an aspiration only, employers are free to offer rates of pay that reflect their perception of the importance of the job, and communication professionals are recruited with the skills that reflect those rates.

Education is possibly the most difficult of interpreting domains, but interpreters generally prefer not to work in that domain, so the work is usually undertaken by Communication Support Workers (CSWs). The CSW role often involves a myriad of duties; cleaning juvenile client's hearing aids, testing and changing batteries, being

aware of sound amplification systems and how they work in order to rearrange a room to become acoustically appropriate, building long-term relationships with teaching staff in order to have parity for a Deaf student in the learning environment, modifying teaching resources to match recognised appropriate levels of English for Deaf students whose level of English is below national standards, promoting Deaf awareness in educational institutions by organising events aimed at staff and students, being flexible enough to be able and willing to use SSE (sign supported English), BSL (British sign language), notetaking or whatever is required to support communication. All those direct and indirect aspects of the CSW role are addressed on the disappearing Edexcel CSW course. CSWs undertaking that course are required to show understanding and competence, not only in those areas, but also the practical dilemmas that present in each. The CSW performs a specialist service, which requires a great deal of skill in addition to interpreting. For that reason, Frank Harrington suggested in 2001 that the status and purpose of the various functions of the CSW need to be re-defined, re-valued and separated. He suggested that these various functions could be performed by separately skilled and more highly trained individuals. However, he admits that there are enormous implications in terms of cost, not to mention the need for a complete change of philosophy, for educators and employers. Harrington wrote his seminal paper in 2001, but the change of philosophy remains an aspiration. In addition to that, should the CSW functions be separated as he suggests, there is no reason to believe that interpreters would be queuing at the school gates to perform the interpreting function.

The CSW role is viewed as a 'stepping stone' toward interpreter qualification, therefore remaining in the education domain after qualification is actually perceived as a backward step. Many interpreters are well aware of the diversity of the CSW role because they have experienced it, and for that reason have a conscious aim to pursue a career that focuses on interpreting alone without the CSW 'clutter'. It could be argued that some of those interpreters who articulate the view that education is too simplistic a domain, failed to perform the role of CSW properly, because it was just a means to an end. A by-product of the 'stepping stone' problem is that many services are plagued by a high turnover of CSWs, which in turn leads to the need to constantly recruit, and at an ever lower qualification level.

Some qualified interpreters will explain that working in education is detrimental to the development of their signing skill. The argument is that the quality of their signing will depreciate because in education they are working with emerging users of BSL. However, this hampering of signing skill need not occur if an interpreter maintains strong links with the Deaf community and makes sure she has regular professional development. There is another view, however: A study was conducted of interpreters using Australian sign language when interpreting for a university lecture. The key finding of the study was that successful interpretations predominantly used a free interpretation approach, but switched between translation styles at particular points of the text (Napier 2002). It could be argued therefore, certainly at post 16 level, that Deaf students mistakenly request SSE because they have always used it or they think they have, but that a more expansive BSL style can not only be readily accessed, but actually be more appropriate. Communication professionals in education therefore should not feel obliged to be shackled to an interpreting style that they perceive will negatively affect their interpreting skills.

It has been argued that negative perceptions toward interpreters working in mainstream education usually have more to do with their lack of professional behaviour than the setting itself (Janzen 2005). However, it is true that many interpreters distance themselves from CSWs, and because most CSWs work in education, this affects the perception of the education domain. That detachment is in part illustrated by the following: The minutes of the April 2004 meeting of the Independent Registration Panel (IRP) included the report of a letter from Doug Alker who was then chair of the British Deaf Association, sent to the CACDP in February 2004, suggesting: “The ‘stretching’ of the Register to incorporate people working as interpreters below JTI status”. The meeting discussed the letter and its suggestion and the following statement was recorded in the minutes: ‘it was agreed that the main responsibility of the Panel was to promote standards: the proposal to ‘stretch’ the Register was seen as undermining this responsibility. ASLI representatives made clear that they could not continue to support the IRP if the current agreed national standards were lowered’. That statement is unambiguous, but what is clear also is that a Deaf view may not necessarily dovetail with an interpreter view. This is demonstrated further by the following: At a regional meeting of the Association of Communication

Support Workers (ACSW) held in Chelmsford in February 2008, the keynote speaker, Jeanette Wright (Deafened) spoke about her personal preference of CSWs over interpreters, and made the following (paraphrased) comment, “We need a register of CSWs. I prefer to work with CSWs, but I want a list so that I can make an informed choice.” This serves to illustrate the fact that Deaf people have personal preferences. Some find a qualified interpreter difficult to access, and would prefer someone who performs in the CSW role. Such folk are aware of the different roles and make an informed choice. However, many Deaf people simply do not know the difference between the services on offer and may make statements such as they prefer their CSW, “Because they are friendlier,” and choose not to use interpreters, “Because they are too professional.” It is this sort of subjectiveness that perhaps we need to move away from so that users can make a truly informed choice with the help of clear guidelines. That however, throws up an interesting question: should those that profit from providing interpreting services also be charged with helping users make an informed choice? That aside, it does raise the question of whether Deaf people hold the view that an interpreter’s attitude is more important than her or his skill. All these issues can be discussed and addressed, but the subject of the educational CSW is a different more crucial issue because the users are not ordinarily involved in choosing their own service provider.

The pupil/interpreter age differential.

On another point, a study could be undertaken of the pupil/interpreter age differential. To be more precise, a hypothesis could be proposed that the age ratio in years of the communication professional should be in inverse proportion to the age of the primary school Deaf child. The reasoning is as follows: match the most experienced mature interpreter with the youngest primary school Deaf child. The child at that age will consider anyone over a certain height to be an adult so the greater age differential will not be an issue, but that adult will have the maturity to realise the crucial nature of the relationship, have the necessary skills to perform the role, have the patience that maturity endows but not the baggage of personal ambition that considers the role a stepping-stone. As the child grows older, increasingly use younger interpreters, until at 6th form, the age of the interpreter is much closer to the age of the student, almost at the point of being peers. The teenage student will empathise with the interpreter who

will also be accepted as a role model. The interpreter will be aware of contemporary changes in BSL and its current colloquial characteristics and therefore be best suited to support that student. When the Deaf student enters university, the maturity issue lessens and is replaced crucially amongst other issues by the need for the interpreter to have a proper understanding of the subject studied. Such a consideration however, may be a bridge too far, because there are too many difficulties that militate against this and other reasoned propositions.

To summarise therefore, the difficulties are as follows: The use of an appropriate language professional in the education domain may be obstructed by a 'reasonable' financial or medical agenda. There are by far not enough appropriate language professionals for all the educational requirements. Of those who are such professionals, few are willing to work in education due to attitude, poor remuneration and fear of how the domain will affect their signing skills. Many interpreters feel aloof from CSWs and by default, the domain in which they generally work. Many CSWs regard education as a means to becoming interpreters, so the constant need to recruit and the lack of a nationally accepted pay scale opens the way for less skilled personnel to enter the domain.

The question must be asked, what can be done to resolve the situation? The regulations that govern discrimination and the rights of Deaf people remain open for informed lobbying for the provisions to be strengthened, but any such strengthening would take time to work through the system, would financially effect the stated requirements of individual Deaf students and raise the cost of provision in educational establishments at ground level. There would be resistance to change at every stage; perhaps the most significant that it would make an impact through local education authorities on government finances. However, should any strengthening be achieved, several of the issues would be brought to stakeholder attention and be addressed in measure. The bare fact that there are not enough appropriate personnel to fill the posts is impossible to address in the short term. There may be plans afoot to train and recruit a whole new generation of interpreters to redress the imbalance, but we will wait to observe how many of those would be willing to work in education. Attitudes are perhaps the most resistant to change, and can be altered only through education

and common consent. With all those negatives in mind, it would clearly be unwise to ring-fence the status of qualified interpreters and focus on their needs and aspirations, however worthy this may seem, but pay no heed to the army of CSWs who are conscientiously working with Deaf students at every level with much success and approval. It may even be contributing to the problem. The relationship between sign language interpreters and CSWs can be summed up in George Bernard Shaw's words, "Two peoples divided by a common language".

Despite the seeming insurmountable nature of the many-faceted problem there are, however, several pragmatic ways that it can be faced:

1. CSWs can avail themselves of a package that includes access to well contextualised training and support, a clear progression ladder for improvement, a buddy system, access to resources, a CPD pathway and a network of localised informed assistance. That package and more is being addressed by ACSW.
2. Interpreter training can be delivered to working CSWs who have the level 2 and 3 BSL qualification. The pragmatic reasoning behind that is that because such people are interpreting already, they should be trained how to do it. Should such a system be inaugurated, the impact on the skills of future interpreters would be immense.
3. CSWs should seek to work in service teams based in education centres that offer support, mentoring, training, time for assignment preparation, timetabled shadowing of more experienced CSWs and interpreters, and given tangible incentives to improve their skills. Such teams are supportive, work well together, have excellent staff retention even after interpreter qualification is gained, and make a huge impact on the educational experience of many Deaf students. This provision was first identified by Green and Nickerson in 1992 and seen as a future objective. However, today that objective is being realized in many settings.

These issues should be properly considered, but however we approach the issues, the overriding aim in the debate should be an appropriate and worthy service for the Deaf people with whom we work.

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Chair, Association of Communication Support Workers. © March 2009.

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