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| Student Disability ServiceWorking with a BSL/English Interpreter | scan-cropped2col-transback |

This guidance is aimed at lecturers and tutors working with students who use British Sign Language (BSL).

**What BSL/English interpreters do**

Interpreters are there for the benefit of lecturers and tutors as well as for the Deaf[[1]](#footnote-1) student. They will:

* translate into British Sign Language (BSL) what is said in lectures, seminars, tutorials etc
* translate into spoken English the BSL contributions of Deaf students (eg questions, comments, presentations etc).
* adhere to a professional code of conduct, which includes issues of quality and confidentiality

They can also sometimes advise on interpreting issues, as appropriate to individual situations.

**What BSL/English interpreters don’t do**

* Offer opinions or join in discussions in their own right
* Answer questions on behalf of the student

**How to work with an interpreter**

BSL is a separate language with its own grammatical structure. As with other interpreting situations between two languages, processing is complex and skilled.

Key implications are as follows:

**1. Advance information**

* Make sure interpreters have as much advance information as possible, so that they can prepare for unfamiliar vocabulary and areas of knowledge.
* Give interpreters prior access to any film extracts you may be showing in class. Hopefully the films will be subtitled – but, if so, there still may be a need for at least some of the content to be interpreted into BSL.

**2. Positioning**

* Be guided by the student and interpreter as to where they should sit. Situations will vary in terms of optimal communication conditions, but there should always be light on the interpreter (eg not positioned in front of a window with the light behind them). The student and interpreter will know what will work best.

**3. During the lecture or group session**

* Ensure only one person speaks at a time. This can be really difficult in quick-fire small group seminars, but it is vital because only one message can be interpreted at a time.
* Make sure that there are breaks in a session. Interpreting (and watching interpreters) requires intense concentration and the optimum period of interpreting is 20 minutes. Interpreters can work longer than this, but over long periods the quality will inevitably suffer, as well as the Deaf person’s capacity for taking in information.
* Allow ‘wait times’ when requiring responses from students in Q and A sessions and discussions. This is because interpreting involves a slight processing delay. It is notoriously difficult for lecturers to consistently build in these wait times, but it is essential for Deaf students’ full inclusion.
* Don’t speak at the same time as demonstrating or pointing to materials such as Powerpoints slides etc. This is incredibly difficult to practice at first, as we routinely expect hearing students to take in a commentary while looking at something. However, it’s simply not possible for the Deaf student to watch an interpreter and look elsewhere at the same time.
* Be prepared for the interpreter and/or the students to interrupt in order to clarify or repeat a point.

**4. Communicating directly with the Deaf student**

The student will be watching the interpreter, so there are some things to remember:

* Look at student even though they may be looking at the interpreter. It can sometimes feel strange at first, but an important principle.
* Speak to the Deaf student as if the interpreter wasn’t there (‘What do you think about…?’ as opposed to ‘Ask her what she thinks about…’). Again this can feel strange at first but is easy to get used to.

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**If you require this document in an alternative format please contact the Student Disability Service on 0131 650 6828 or email: disability.service@ed.ac.uk**

1. The capitalised form ‘Deaf’ is the convention commonly used to refer to deaf people who have BSL as first or preferred language [↑](#footnote-ref-1)