



# THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH

## Student Disability Service

### **Working with a British Sign Language (BSL)/English Interpreter in Higher Education**

This guideline 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<sup>1</sup> student.

They will:

- translate into BSL what is said in lectures, seminars, tutorials etc
- translate into spoken English the BSL contributions of Deaf students (e.g. questions, comments, presentations).
- adhere to a professional code of conduct, which includes issues of quality and confidentiality <https://www.nrcpd.org.uk/code-of-conduct>  
<https://thescottishregister.co.uk/policies/>

#### **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:

#### ***In advance of the session***

- Make sure interpreters have advance information (at least 48 hours, whenever possible), so that they can prepare for unfamiliar vocabulary, abbreviations 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.
- In consultation with the student, share information with the rest of the group on how to work with interpreters.

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<sup>1</sup> The capitalised form 'Deaf' is a convention used to refer to deaf people who have BSL as first or preferred language  
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- Advance info for online sessions:
  - Inform interpreters about choice of platform and include info on how to use the platform (including log-in info). Where possible allow the Deaf student to choose the platform which will be most suitable for working with interpreters.
    - Ensure that 'multi-pin' is enabled, so that the interpreter is always visible to the student.
    - Where possible, ensure that chat between student and interpreter is also enabled.
  - Check audio and video will be of highest possible quality
  - Enable student, tutor and interpreter to meet in advance (10-15 minutes as far as possible) in order to check all is working smoothly. Check whether the interpreter will be translating the student's BSL into spoken language, or whether the student will be contributing in spoken English.
- Advance info for face-to-face sessions.
  - Room layout
    - If possible, share a photo of the room with student and interpreters in advance, usually available through Room Booking: <https://www.ed.ac.uk/timetabling-examinations/timetabling/room-bookings/bookable-rooms3>
  - 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 (e.g. not positioned in front of a window with the light behind them). The student and interpreter will know what will work best
    - Group discussions: again be guided by student – as far as possible use horseshoe or circle so that it is clear who is speaking.

### ***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 (use 'hands up' for online sessions)  
Ask everyone to state their name before speaking, so that the Deaf person is clear who is talking.  
Don't refer to the interpreter – always refer to the Deaf person by their name.  
The interpreter will only speak in order to:
  - Speak in English what the deaf person is signing in BSL
  - Indicate that the Deaf person wants to speak
- Ask for clarification  
If only one interpreter is working, make sure that there are breaks in a session. Interpreting (and watching interpreters) requires intense concentration and the optimum period of interpreting is 20-30 minutes.
- If two interpreters are working, be aware that they will swap over every 20 minutes or so. It's useful to be aware that this means a change in the voice of the translation from BSL to spoken English.

- 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 (or check a spelling).
- Online sessions:
  - Turn on captions if possible, as back-up for student
  - Mute microphones when not speaking (background noise can make interpreting more difficult)
  - If you have had to use a platform which is difficult for interpreters to work (eg Collaborate) they may have to use a separate platform to provide the interpreting. In these cases it's important to remember that the interpreter is working on a separate screen.

### ***Communicating directly with a Deaf student (including 1:1 communication)***

- 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.

### ***After the session***

- If possible, have a debrief with the Deaf person to ensure everything was captured and answer any questions. Interpreters may sometimes need to discuss or check issues which arose during the session.