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A Qualitative Study of American Sign Language Interpreting for Deaf Individuals with

Disabilities

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Abstract

There are complexities involved in American Sign Language (ASL) interpreting for the unique population of Deaf individuals with disabilities (DWD), particularly in educational settings, that must be considered. Based on the foundation of existing literature regarding the field of ASL interpreting, educational interpreting, and strategies of working with DWD individuals, the researcher created a theoretical conceptual framework that combined the frameworks of ASL Interpreting and Special Education. The current primary research is aimed at addressing another portion of the gap, that is, research regarding practical experiences in working with this population. This study was conducted through questionnaires sent out through email to ASL interpreters located through snowball sampling. This research seeks to understand the experiences of ASL interpreters who have worked with DWD individuals through participants responses to questions about strategies used, and unique challenges and rewards faced, when working with this population. Responses were dissected through content analysis to uncover trends and themes among the personal experiences of the participants. The researcher uncovered three major themes from these experiences: individualization, flexibility, and collaboration. Much of the data supports the proposed conceptual framework, but more research is needed to corroborate these findings. This research positively impacts the ASL interpreting field by providing insight into an area that currently lacks research and by bringing awareness to the need for more education and training for those who will be working with this exceptional population.

A Qualitative Study of American Sign Language Interpreting for Deaf Individuals with Disabilities

The Deaf community is a population with a unique language and culture. In contrast to the medical model which views deafness as a problem to be fixed, the Deaf community does not consider deafness to be a disability. Out of respect to Deaf individuals and Deaf culture, deafness will not be referred to as a disability in this study, despite it being categorized as such in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The researcher has adopted the term “Deaf with disabilities (DWD) from Guardino and Cannon (2015), as a culturally relevant way to label this population. While this is ultimately a low-incidence population, within the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (DHH) community, the prevalence is remarkably high. According to various sources, between 30-55% of DHH individuals have at least one disability (Bruce & Borders, 2015) (Paul, 2015) (Musyoka, Gentry, & Bartlett, 2015). This high occurrence reveals the necessity of understanding this population and of finding successful strategies to implement when interpreting for DWD individuals.

Literature Review

In endeavoring to reach an understanding of interpreting for DWD individuals, it is imperative to begin with a thorough consideration of the existent literature. Relevant portions of such literature include research regarding the role of the interpreter in general and educational settings, as well as research documenting current strategies being used with Deaf individuals with disabilities, outside of the field of interpreting.

The Role of the Interpreter

The general role of an American Sign Language (ASL) interpreter is to provide equal access to information for Deaf and hearing clients, bridging the communication gap between

spoken and signed languages. Interpreters aim to maintain dynamic equivalence, accurately conveying to the audience the full meaning and intent of the speaker (Humphrey & Alcorn, 2007). According to the RID Code of Professional Conduct, the personal influence of interpreters should be minimal or avoided if possible (Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, Inc., 2005). The role of educational interpreters however, is often viewed as wider in scope, encompassing responsibilities such as providing clarification to instructions, facilitating peer interactions, and informing educational professionals on the deaf child's progress in learning (Anita & Kreimeyer, 2001). The educational interpreter will also likely serve as a language model for the Deaf student, whether seeking to or not. Although there is much debate on this topic, the primary consensus is that the educational interpreter is primarily there for communication purposes, but they may be more actively involved in the classroom as well (Brown & Schick, 2011; Anita & Kreimeyer, 2001).

It is important to acknowledge the legal side of this discussion as well, regarding the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). IDEA influences this discussion in two main ways: legally defining disability and officially labeling the role of an educational interpreter. This law delineates 13 disability categories including "deafness or hearing impairments" which qualify students for special education and related services (IDEA, 2004). As stated before, the term DWD does not consider Deafness to be a disability but does include the wide range of other disabilities listed in the aforementioned law that may occur comorbid to deafness. IDEA (2004) also established the role of ASL interpreters in the Individualized Education Program (IEP) as a "related service provider." This means that interpreters should be involved in the IEP process and should aim to maximize educational success for the Deaf student. Special education is more regulated than general education, so these laws impact the

student's entire education. Research shows, however, a lack of knowledge and compliance with these laws, as interpreters are often not aware of, or involved in, students' IEP teams (Boam, 2018).

Existing Strategies for DWD Individuals

The majority of existing literature related to the topic of DWD individuals discusses DWD individuals in general, and educational strategies used with this population. One challenge that must be noted at the beginning of this discussion is the fact that disabilities that occur comorbid to deafness do not merely add an additional challenge, but rather, are multiplicative in nature (Borders, Bock, Probst, & Kroesch, 2019). When disabilities overlap as they do with the DWD population, creative interventions are necessary. Communication challenges are a main area of focused intervention, because effective communication is the basis of learning various subjects and may be particularly difficult to achieve for this population. A variety of resources suggest disability-specific interventions for the DWD population. For example, Bruce and Borders (2015) outline communication interventions for Deaf individuals with intellectual disabilities and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) including Prelinguistic Mileu Teaching, Picture Exchange Communication System, and Functional Communication Teaching. Other interventions specifically for Deaf students with ASD include minimizing complex language, making the classroom more visually accessible, and establishing routines and individualized schedules (Szymanski, 2012). Interventions for students who are Deafblind are also mentioned, including tangible representations/tactile approaches, child guided approaches, and interacting with an adult communication partner (Bruce & Borders, 2015). Research has also suggested that some disabilities may cause particular challenges for interpreters, such as students with ASD or physical disabilities. Students with ASD are likely to give significantly less eye contact and

feedback to the interpreter, and students with physical disabilities may have particular difficulty with sign production (Rivera, n.d.).

The Gap

There exists a twofold gap in the literature regarding Deaf Individuals with disabilities. The first component of this is that there is not an established framework that effectively combines aspects of the existing frameworks for the fields of special education and ASL interpreting. The second component is the lack of practical knowledge and skills for ASL interpreters to utilize with this population.

Theoretical Framework

The first portion of the gap in research is the need for a framework for interpreting for Deaf individuals with disabilities, particularly in educational settings. The researcher and previous co-researcher proposed the following conceptual framework, as a combination of the existing framework of the field of ASL Interpreting and that of special education. “In order to follow established guidelines for Educational Interpreters while also meeting the needs of the student, the researchers propose that in working with DWD individuals, the interpreter—in addition to their typical role of maintaining dynamic equivalence through interpretation of linguistic information in the classroom—must 1) be familiar with the IEP team and the role of each member, 2) be familiar with the student’s needs and motivations, and 3) be familiar with the academic and behavioral strategies successfully implemented for the DWD student” (Weaver & Mason, 2019). This framework also has a large focus on individualization and the requirement of the interpreter understanding the needs of that specific DWD individual.

Call for Research

Much of the existing literature acknowledges the current lack of information about, and inadequate services provided to, students who are Deaf with disabilities. These articles call for more research, specifically to provide educational professionals with data and support to effectively meet student needs (Bruce & Borders, 2015) (Paul, 2015) (Musyoka, Gentry, & Bartlett, 2015). This is particularly important as the realm of special education puts an emphasis on evidence-based practices, and without further research on strategies teachers and interpreters are using with this population, it is extremely difficult to find or use these practices (Brown & Schick, 2011).

Methods

Design

This research seeks to understand the personal experiences of ASL interpreters who have worked with Deaf individuals with disabilities. The research was conducted as a qualitative phenomenology. As mentioned previously, there is a significant dearth of information on this topic, meaning that this research is the first brick to fill a very large gap. A qualitative research design was chosen, therefore, to serve as a small starting point for future research to branch off of. The phenomenological design allowed the researcher to gain insight into the lived experiences of ASL interpreters who have worked with this population.

Participants

The researcher received approval from the Liberty University Institutional Review Board for this qualitative study to be conducted through anonymous online questionnaires. Participants were found through snowball sampling, also known as convenience sampling, where the researcher used existing connections and branches off of those to reach the 9 participants who have the shared experience of interpreting for one or more DWD individuals. All participants

were contacted by email and were sent a recruitment letter containing a link to the electronic consent information and research questionnaire. This online format enabled research to not be limited to one geographical location and expanded the pool of potential participants.

Data Collection

The questionnaire contained demographic questions regarding experience and qualifications, questions relating to the role of the interpreter, questions regarding disability-specific strategies known/used, and questions about challenges and rewards of interpreting (in general and specifically in working with DWD individuals). These open-ended questions allowed participants to elaborate on their experiences, and were all aimed at providing information to answer the main research question; what are the experiences of ASL interpreters who have worked with Deaf individuals with disabilities?

Results

The responses collected were analyzed in an attempt to find common themes among the participant's experiences in working with DWD individuals. The researchers' knowledge of both the field of special education and ASL Interpreting influenced how the content analysis was conducted, and what labels were chosen for different data points. The three major themes found to be consistent are individualization, flexibility, and collaboration.

Individualization

One major theme found throughout participants responses was individualization. This term is the centerpiece of special education, but at its core it represents the uniqueness and variation that comes with interacting with different individuals, particularly those with disabilities. The use of individualization in these settings often looked like production modification and adapting for clients' needs.

Production modification. One of the most prevalent and widespread subthemes throughout all the responses was the modification of sign production while interpreting. Participant 8 suggested that one of the changes to production involves getting the content and concepts “in a manner that the client is able to grasp.” For individuals who are Deaf with a physical disability, production modifications may look like “repetition of questions and answers to make sure the results are correct” (Participant 1). Multiple participants (3, 5, & 9) suggested that Deaf individuals with learning disabilities and intellectual disabilities “may need slower signing” and more gestural communication. For clients with more severe disabilities, the production may be majorly modified to be more “summary-based interpretation, much more visual, and [have] a lot more emphasis and facials” (Participant 2).

Adapting for clients’ needs. Multiple participants addressed the necessity of adapting to clients’ needs in correspondence to their disability. Participants 1 and 5 noted that different disabilities have different effects on language fluency, and Participant 3 stated that a main role of the interpreter is “meeting the communication needs of all parties involved.” Some of the challenges addressed include clients with minimal language skills, slow cognitive functioning, and behavior challenges. Interpreters can meet the needs of Deafblind clients by making physical changes such as wearing black, using dark lipstick, and changing the backdrop to be more accessible (Participant 5). Interpreters can also meet the needs of clients with physical disabilities by adjusting their physical position in relation to the client and making sure there is enough space in the room (Participant 7 & 2).

Flexibility

Another major theme uncovered while analyzing responses was the need for, and usage of, flexibility. Participants experienced situations they were not prepared for, and often had to be

flexible and decide upon solutions and strategies in the moment. Flexibility was exhibited by interpreters through both critical thinking and improvisation.

Critical thinking. One subtheme under flexibility was that of critical thinking.

Interpreters expressed the need to critically consider situations in order to provide the most effective access, including matching the clients' needs and language used. Participant 6 supports this idea by stating that the interpreter's "role shifts as needed to ensure access is given." With clients who have intellectual disabilities interpreters use critical thinking to "try to grasp how their mind processes things" (Participant 8) and interpret accordingly, judiciously selecting from the many different techniques for clarification (Participant 4).

Improvisation. This subtheme does not imply that interpreters working with this population are providing rushed or subpar service to clients, but rather indicates a general lack of preparation for these situations. Participant 7 shared that he/she never planned on working with the DWD population but ended up in such settings multiple times. Participant 1 also shared that in working for Video Relay interpreting, there have been many times when the client has had some sort of undisclosed disability, so the interpreter must take time to "initially fetter out what the issue is" before moving forward.

Collaboration

Collaboration, between interpreting team members, interpreters and their clients, and between other parties involved such as special educators and the IEP team, was frequently discussed in descriptions of participants' experiences. This topic was largely discussed negatively, with participants noting the lack of communication and collaboration between parties involved with the DWD client.

Collaborative communication. A key component of collaboration illuminated through descriptions of participants' experiences was the need for collaborative communication. Interpreters working with DWD individuals may need to "tell the providers that information (what challenges [they] might face) in these situations" (Participant 1) as well as helping other professionals understand things like language dysfluency (Participant 3). Participant 2 shared one of the biggest challenges relating to collaborative communication which is, "interpreters are left out of the loop often and we aren't even made aware of each student's exact accommodations, according to their IEPs."

Professionalism. Professionalism was another theme that carried throughout the information participants shared about collaboration. This theme was evident in descriptions of teaming, requesting support such as Certified Deaf Interpreters (CDI), and mentoring opportunities. Participant 9 aptly encapsulated this sub-theme by stating, "keep everyone professional and we all win."

Discussion

Data collected through this research corroborated the definitions and concepts used from the ASL interpreting and special education fields to create the theoretical conceptual framework and supported the distinction between the role of an ASL interpreter in educational versus other settings. There was an overall commonality of interpreters perceiving their role to be about message equivalence, and educational interpreters adding on other nonlinguistic roles that would increase student access to content and opportunity for success. The themes discovered through content analysis largely correspond with the proposed theoretical framework, although there are components that extended beyond the scope of the combined framework as well. The major theme of individualization found in research participant's experiences clearly corresponds with

individualization as the centerpiece of special education. Understanding and adapting to client needs correlates with the need to be familiar with the student's personality, motivation, and needs. Changes to production would likely stem from this deeper understanding of the client. The theme of collaboration is also relevant to the framework which suggests the importance of knowing the roles of the IEP team and working collaboratively with teachers to understand interventions already implemented. While only a few of the participants mentioned IEPs directly, the idea of communicating and collaborating with other educational professionals was widespread. The theme of flexibility is slightly less linked to the conceptual framework but does align with existing information in the field of special education as a whole. The subtheme of critical thinking specifically supports what other existing research has discovered regarding this population; that there is much complexity surrounding this topic, and not enough data to inform effective strategies, leaving interpreters to actively work through situations as they arise. Additionally, one common phrase that came up throughout responses as a reward of working with DWD individuals was "light bulb moments." Multiple participants shared the satisfaction experienced when students finally understood a concept or accomplished a new task. The researcher viewed this as an important unifier in why a large portion of participants valued working with this population, despite the challenges and lack of resources.

Limitations

As the researcher was analyzing the data, one limitation noted was the brevity of some responses to the online questionnaire. Responses to some of the questions lacked the depth or clarity to be meaningfully analyzed for common themes. Maintaining complete anonymity of research participants, however, prevented follow-up questions or further interviews, as no identifying information was provided through the questionnaire that would allow such contact to

be made. This limitation could be addressed in the future by changing the format of data collection, allowing participants to be contacted with follow-up questions, or by utilizing in-person interviews which would allow for a dynamic interaction between the participants and the researcher.

Additionally, there were some themes such as self-awareness and self-analysis that were fairly prominent among responses but lacked sufficient data to warrant their own theme, or sufficient relevance to be included under an existing theme. Further research could ask questions geared more specifically toward the concept of interpreter's self-analysis or self-awareness in working with this population. More generally, simply collecting more qualitative data from interpreters who have worked with this population would be beneficial to compare trends found among the experiences of a wider range of individuals.

Conclusion

This study expanded the current understanding of interpreting for Deaf individuals with disabilities by gaining insight into the personal experiences of nine American Sign Language interpreters who have encountered this population in their time working as interpreters. While this study has provided some valuable insight into the experience of ASL interpreters who have worked with DWD individuals, there is still so much more to learn. The researcher joins with many other researchers in the ASL interpreting and educational fields in the call for more research to be done regarding interpreting for this group of exceptional students. The researcher hopes that this research will serve as a starting point for many more studies to be conducted from, and that much more will be learned as a result of the common trends found among interpreter's experiences.

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