

Riding the Rails

By: **Patty Gordon**

ASL Version:

[YOUTUBE](#)

English Version:

Here goes the roller-coaster world of educational interpreting. It's rewarding, confusing, frustrating and an overall wild ride. I hope it is a fantastic experience whether you are new to the environment or well seasoned. Cari and Jenee asked me to put something together for the Educational Interpreter Committee. I decided to share some basic thoughts and principles for all of us at this time of year. Take what you need and leave the rest!

One

Take a breath when you can. It's so easy to be running and running (particularly in the early grades), or sitting with no one watching (in the higher grades). You'll feel frustration and anxiety build. Stop, take a breath. You are being asked to do a very complex and perhaps, somewhat impossible job. It's not all on you (there is an educational team involved), but it sure can feel like it. If you go to yoga, choose one of the Prana practices you do there. If you don't regularly practice yoga, just take three breaths. Breathe in through your nose, breathing deep enough to see your abdomen expand, hold it at the top for a few seconds and then release your breath through your mouth. Then turn yourself back to the moment and those amazing kids.

Two

The student is being asked to learn written English, spoken English, ASL and translation skills along with the content of the program. It's a big task and everyone on the team can support the student by fingerspelling to reinforce the learning of academic English, expanding (what linguists are calling contextualization these days) and in some cases just taking the time to make sure a concept is understood even though the teacher may be continuing to talk. In recent research done by Melissa Smith (2013), interpreters in her study were doing standard "interpreting" a very small percentage of the time they were working. The rest of the time was mostly dealing with relationships and visual stimuli.

If you find the actual interpreting you do feels like a small percent of your work, you are probably working just like some of the most highly qualified interpreters out there.

Smith's research can be found in her book "More Than Meets the Eye: Revealing the Complexities of an Interpreted Education" published by Gallaudet University Press.

Three

You are being asked to be a language model for a student. Language is learned not by watching, but through interaction. Your interaction with them enhances their language growth. Even if they are reticent, make sure you have some sort of linguistic exchange each time you work in a student's environment. Encourage as much interaction between the student and other signers on their team as well.

Four

Get signs built into the classroom right away. This helps peer connection and overall acceptance in the classroom. I have an example of how easy it can be, although it does

require you as the interpreter to step up and make the moment happen. I was interpreting in a 2nd grade classroom early in the year. I was a substitute interpreter and as I understood it, there had been no formal in-service with the teacher, and the teacher had never had more than one Deaf child in their classroom (there were several in this class). At the first opportunity, I spoke up to teach a sign to the class. This I did without dialogue with the teacher or paras in the class before it happened. The teacher was explaining their rules for a bathroom break and eventually said "Stand up, we're all going now". The Deaf student did not stand up and the teacher asked them directly to say what the class was going to do next. I knew full well the student had no idea (because I was still making sure the student understood about the hand-washing rule). The Deaf student shrugged, the teacher directed another student to clarify what was going on. The hearing student dutifully said in English "We're going to the bathroom". My cue! I immediately said, "Can I show you the sign for bathroom?" The student nodded, I showed the student and the class (and teacher), everyone did it and we moved on. Every time the word came up, I made a point of showing it and making eye contact with various students in the class. It's a tiny thing, but a start on getting as much interaction going as possible. During a quick moment I checked with the classroom teacher if they were cool with what I did and I got an affirmation. Wish I could have been there more to continue to make that happen.

Five

If you are working with higher grade students, recognize the critical need to continue fingerspelling academic words they will see in their texts and tests. The student may prompt you to abbreviate or make up a sign. You can agree to do that sometimes (as a way to foster their independent decision-making), but let them know you will switch between the shorthand (no pun intended) and fingerspelling the item because they have to be familiar with the word in written form. It's funny how students can sometimes be a bit uncomfortable reading fingerspelling...just like us!

Six

Seek support and companions who understand what is happening. Talk to the DHH teacher and make them your ally. Spend time connecting with the Educational Interpreting Committee (EIC) community. If there is a Deaf adult in the building, district or this child's life, find them and talk to them. It doesn't have to always be about education. Just having folks to share your day with is huge. I don't know if I could have stayed in the field without my buddy system.

Best of luck for a great school year, it's going to be a great ride! Be sure to be in touch with Cari and Jenee and be a part of the new and fantastic Educational Interpreter Committee!



Patty Gordon has a B.A. in Linguistics from Metropolitan State University and a Master of Liberal Studies degree from the University of Minnesota. She also holds certificates from the University of Colorado at Boulder's Teaching ASL and Master Mentor programs. She has been a freelance interpreter working in performing arts, medical, government and corporate settings since 1987. As an interpreter educator, she has taught at Western Oregon University, Front Range Community College and St. Catherine University Minneapolis. She is a co-author of the "A Plan for Mentorship of Educational Interpreters in Minnesota" (2006) and has worked as a mentor for K-12 interpreters since 2001. She co-developed and facilitates a three-course online program for educational interpreters preparing to take the EIPA exam.