

“Smoothing the Seams”

THIS is what deictic terms are, and HERE is Why Ed Terps Should Care

* Supplemental Assignment

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In a 4th grade classroom, an art teacher is demonstrating how to create a pinch pot. Her hands nimbly pinch and stretch the clay as she explains each step in the process. The majority of students in the class watch her movements as they listen to her instructions – occasionally looking away to manipulate their own clay. For one student, who is Deaf, the learning process is complicated. Looking between the teacher and the interpreter, the deaf student struggles to stitch together all the different visual inputs to make sense of the instructions.

Students receiving instruction directly in their native language (ie hearing kid in a mainstream setting or a Deaf ASL user being taught directly in ASL, not through an interpreter) are able to experience an important phenomenon known as seamless cognition. Through this process, students are able to effortlessly weave together two pieces of information they receive about a topic at the same time. For example, a teacher may use a visual aide to demonstrate what they are explaining verbally, and the student makes the connection between what is spoken and what is shown.

There are many reasons for instruction in this manner, such that it allows for students with different learning styles to access the information in meaningful ways. Presenting two pieces of information simultaneously through direct instruction, visual aids, gesture, and so forth demands that students make connections between information provided. Teachers at all educational levels do this.

Examples:

- An elementary school art teacher talks about how she’s modeling the clay **while** she demonstrates.
- A middle school science teacher is leaning over a specimen for dissection and points to organs, glands, etcetera **while** talking about how these parts work together to form a system.
- A high school math teacher points to results of the first step of solving an equation **while** explaining how that information will be plugged into the next step in the process.
- A professor in an undergrad class about natural disasters talks about the historical impacts on various countries from a specific seafloor fissure **while** using a laser pointer to show where the fissure is and how quakes have traveled from it.
- A professor in a graduate level course is pointing to problematic areas in a projected document **while** narrating what corrections could be made.

These scenarios (and their demands) call upon a lot of interpreter resources (controls), including the ability to summarize, referencing techniques, use of space and classifiers, and so on. Frequently, when teachers or professors instruct in this way where more than one piece of information is being presented at a time, they will use deictic terms such as this, that, here, there.

Deaf student receiving auditory information through a visual interpretation lose the opportunity for seamless cognition UNLESS the interpreter recognizes what deictic terms are referring to and makes that information explicit.

Hearing students in a mainstream class have the privilege of hearing the word 'this' at the exact moment the teacher points to its referent. They see where 'over here' means, and they know 'what goes where' because these ambiguous deictic terms are being co-presented with the exact, visual referent, and so processing the two pieces of information happens effortlessly - seamlessly.

The same easy and meaningful access happens for a Deaf student who uses ASL receiving direct instruction in ASL. The instructor may use various methods to ensure seamless cognition for their students, including signing in front of or on top of a visual aid. They may direct students' eye gaze to the specific part of the visual aid they are referring to before, during, or after direct instruction. (Ed Terps should strive to adopt these methods! Perhaps an observation of direct instruction from a Deaf teacher to their student to see how it's done might be in order.)

In both of these situations, students are able focus their energy on comprehending the content, making connections beyond the current lesson, and have mental resources available to look for deeper meaning.

But what about the Deaf ASL user receiving this instruction via an interpreter?

If the target message is in spoken English and says, 'This goes over here and that moves up there.' And the interpreter simply signs the words verbatim, then the two pieces of information (deictic terms and their referents) are severed.

The Deaf student has to work extra hard to make connections between the two pieces of information. The hearing students need not put forth any extra effort to 'piece' the information together. That work is done for them by the educator who presents the information directly to them in an accessible mode/manner, so the two pieces of information are intrinsically connected. This is not equitable.

If the interpreter does not take the time to make the implied meaning of deictic terms explicit, the Deaf student has to work extra hard to process the verbal instruction and visual aides separately.

Our job, as cultural mediators who are meant to provide equal access, means that we have the RESPONSIBILITY to 'unpack' deictic terms so that ALL students have an equal opportunity for seamless cognition.

How can we go about doing this?

We would LOVE to hear from YOU about how YOU make that happen! Please share your experiences, insights, tips, and tricks with the greater Minnesota Educational Interpreter community by commenting below and posting related articles and documents. Thank you for helping advance access and enhancing the field

Here are some tips/tricks that I have found useful:

- **Inservice teachers:** Making educators aware of how they can better serve DHH students, explaining how deictic terms can be tricky, and inviting the instructor to brainstorm with you ways that you work TOGETHER sets the tone that you share the goal and responsibility of making class accessible.
- **Pause while interpreting:** Just because someone is talking doesn't mean your hands HAVE TO be moving at all times. Remember, it's about meaningful access, it's not always a word-for-sign

process. If this means you need to **pause, look** to see what the instructor is referring to, and **then interpret** (based on meaning) - go for it! And/or, if the circumstances allow, feel free to reach over and use the visual aid in the same way to make it clear! (maybe not with the clay modeling example (smile), but if you can reach and point to a map with minimal intrusion to the flow of things, I say go for it!) Good for you for taking the time to be as clear as the speaker is!

- **Use your team:** If you have the luxury of having a teammate, use them! Have a conversation about deictic terms and you might best support each other in their interpretation. For instance, the support (not 'off':) interpreter can be responsible for watching the instructor's use of visual aids and can FEED the 'working' interpreter what the deictic terms are referring to. It might be best to discuss with your team, beforehand, how you would like those feeds. (Should they sign the complete message to you with the deictic terms exchanged for their named referents? Should they simply feed "THIS means LEFT HEMISPHERE," for example, and allow you to reconstruct the message?)
- **Ask for clarification:** Just because you inserviced the teacher about the pitfalls of deictic terms through an interpreter of a visual language doesn't mean they will always be avoided. If you need to seek clarification and the circumstances allow, you may deem it necessary to interrupt the speaker to seek clarification. The good news is that, not only will the message be made equally accessible, but sometimes these unplanned exchanges are the best way to make others aware of the interpreting process!

What other ideas have worked for you?



Jenee Petri-Swanson, NIC TSC, is an educational interpreter at heart and views the role of the educational interpreter as a great privilege and profound responsibility. Jenee co-chairs MRID's Educational Interpreters' Committee and co-authored "K-12: A Call to Arms for Sign Language Interpreter Training Programs" available on streetleverage.com. She is a St. Paul College ITP alumni and has been interpreting since 2003. Much of her career has been interpreting in the K-12 setting, but she has also enjoyed working VRS and freelancing on the side. More recently, Jenee has focused on interpreting in a post-secondary setting as she is a full time staff interpreter at the University of Minnesota. (jeneepetri-Swanson.weebly.com)

