



**F.E.E.D. – FRID Engaging, Evaluating and Discussing
April 2017 Discussion Topic**

**Accept or Decline? Questions Sign Language Interpreters
Should Ponder**

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Michael Ballard suggests that sign language interpreters must begin making decisions before an assignment ever begins. Utilizing pre-assignment questions can bring

practitioners more clarity when determining readiness for a job.

Hello, everyone. I'm Michael Ballard and I'm thrilled to be with you today for Street Leverage. It's an exciting time. A little about myself: I grew up learning speech and lip-reading in California and I learned to sign at age 15, and I sign still today. My identity underwent a significant change when I started to learn ASL as I began to interact with a variety of Deaf peers at my high school. Through their instruction, my signing ability greatly improved, and I'm still always learning. I also have to thank the friends of mine who are interpreters. Without your hard work, I wouldn't be where I am today.

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I had been giving thought to this when Brandon Arthur approached me at the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf conference in New Orleans and asked if I was interested in filming an article. I agreed, and after some thought decided to speak on an issue close to my heart and mind: an interpreter's thought process when accepting or declining a job.

Defining the Lens

This article's lens uses as a foundation Dean and Pollard's 2001 research on Demand Control Schema, or DCS[1]. An interpreter needs to fully grasp both concepts of what constitutes the various demands and controls before accepting an assignment.

Demands and Controls

The category of "demands" can be broken into four parts:

- environmental demands: terminology, technology, roles, physical environment
- interpersonal demands: that which is specific to the interpreter and clients involved
- paralinguistic demands: That which is specific to the expressive skills of the client (deaf or hearing)
- intrapersonal demands: That which is specific to the interpreter (inner thoughts, feelings, bias, physical/emotional state)

The concept of "controls" describe what a person can exert influence over in the situation, such as:

- actions or behavior,
- Particular translation/interpretation decisions
- Internal/attitudinal acknowledgments

Accurately Assessing Readiness

Before I go on, I would like to note the word "anosognosia," a term coined in 1999 by Dunning-Kruger in an article at Cornell University[2]. The phenomenon of anosognosia arose to describe research participants' excessive overestimation of their skills and abilities, and the tendency of we as humans to inflate reality so it reflects positively on ourselves. However, it is only through recognition of error that we can reflect and grow. It then follows that interpreters could be prone to the overconfidence that comes with anosognosia, and should make every effort not to overlook that tendency.

Pre-Assignment Analysis

I'd like to pose some overarching questions for interpreter analysis. As an interpreter, one should ask: Do I possess enough controls to satisfy the demands of this assignment? Each of the following sub-questions should be considered through self-analysis and review using a Likert scale approach (1=weakest ability to 5= strongest ability).

1. *Do I have sufficient linguistic skill and content knowledge in the necessary languages to meet the needs of this assignment, and to interpret or translate with accuracy and cultural equivalency?*

It is incumbent on the interpreter to communicate with the managing entity to get all relevant details and demands of the assignment to make that determination. That process takes experience.

At my first staff-faculty meeting at the start of the semester- I am an ASL instructor and moved recently for the job- it so happened that several colleagues wanted to learn some signs, so I invited them to join my class. After two weeks, we attended a meeting to which an agency interpreter had been assigned. The interpreter was not certified or licensed and was clearly incompetent. I was consequently unable to participate in the meeting because I couldn't understand the content. During the meeting, a colleague texted me and asked about the interpreter because they were noticeably confused and fumbling. I gave feedback about the interpreter to the agency after the meeting on the need to improve the quality of services, and it is my hope that in the two years since that meeting that they have improved. That is an example of the necessity of an interpreter possessing the linguistic skills and knowledge required in an assignment in order to interpret effectively and accurately.

2. *Am I psychologically and emotionally stable enough to perform the job requisites? Can I interpret without having a negative influence on the parties involved?*

Due to the unpredictability of assignments, an interpreter must be mentally and emotionally capable of handling unexpected events.

For example, at the birth of my oldest daughter- we have four children- the interpreter at the hospital was respectful, competent and professional and made the experience as seamless as possible, even given the 3:00 A.M. delivery. I'm grateful to have had that positive of an experience. We specifically requested the same interpreter for our second child's birth because the first experience had been so wonderful, and it made the day that much more fun. However, at the birth of our third child my wife and I were terribly disappointed at the assigned interpreter's lack of professionalism in their behavior- they were flirting, making jokes and in general being inappropriate. It was upsetting for my wife to be actively in labor with an interpreter interjecting in the midst of everything. Unfortunately, it's an example of an interpreter not possessing the mental and emotional clarity to navigate that type of situation, and that lack of self-regulation has a serious impact.

3. *Am I taking this assignment because I'm qualified, or because I want the experience?*

As I mentioned, our first two childbirth experiences were exceptional because the interpreter was qualified, but I wonder if the interpreter in the third birth accepted the job solely to gain

more medical interpreting experience. I didn't think to inquire at the time because I was focused on my wife, but the question for me remains. I suggest in those situations that an interpreter looking to gain experience instead ask to observe or mentor with a qualified interpreter and select appropriate assignments rather than cause a situation where communication access in high stakes settings is in jeopardy due to ill qualifications.

4. *Does my preparation vary based on my views of what kind of Deaf client or position is seen to be "high profile" or not?*

My belief is that there is no hierarchy of clients or professions- a Ph.D. should be approached with the same respect and care as a welder, teacher, nurse, carpenter, stay at home parent or any other occupation or station in life. All have value, but are interpreters investing the same amount of time and energy in preparation to reflect that? Interpreters should take the time to examine assumptions of what merits varying levels of preparation and not unfairly weight some assignments or clients above others. Providing interpreting services in a kindergarten or first grade is just as critically important as interpreting doctorate courses, and we need to examine bias, appreciate the human element and rethink how to approach "high profile" vs "low profile" assignments.

5. *Am I able to keep my bias in check?*

A common phrase among interpreters is one on neutrality in assignments: "I'm neutral, not getting involved," etc. Metzger (2011)[3] states that the idealistic "neutral conduit" does not exist. Your biases affect and effect how exchanges take place. Will my presence lead to further oppression of a marginalized group or build bridges that bring groups together? An interpreter should be aware of biases and look for ways to mitigate any negative impact on the interpreted product. For example, if an interpreter finds themselves in a situation where they feel strongly about communication modes being discussed for cultural or educational reasons, or perhaps are interpreting political views that may contrast their own, it is important that the interpreter recognize biases and thoughtfully consider their ability to provide quality service. If it's not possible, they need to excuse themselves from the assignment or allow a team interpreter to interpret. An interpreter not possessing adequate controls will ultimately deliver a flawed product. Ideally, an interpreter should be mentally and emotionally aware enough to recognize biases and determine qualifications and fit prior to the assignment.

Post-Assignment Considerations

I'd like to shift focus from pre-assignment self-analysis questions for considering to post-assignment questions. In my estimation, it's rare that in-depth analysis post-assignment happens as often as it should, but it is worthy of thought. Similarly to the initial set of questions, these would be helpful to answer using the Likert scale method:

1. Am I confident that my interpretation was linguistically and culturally accurate in both English and ASL?
2. What would I do differently if and when I am in a similar context, linguistically, interpersonally, etc?
3. Finally, did I approach the client after the assignment to provide clarifying comments or check in about comprehension?

Considering these questions both before and after each assignment will help develop a stronger awareness of self and decision-making process.

In the End: Gratitude

Again, I want to reiterate that without interpreters, I wouldn't be where I am in my life today. My life journey would look completely different. For all of your hard work, the hours of training, your minds and hearts, blood, sweat, and tears- many, many, thanks. I look forward to seeing you around in the community and will gladly accept any questions on this article. Enjoy your day.

Questions to Consider:

1. How might I better solicit meaningful advice and feedback from my clients as a resource to maintain a healthy self-appraisal?
2. What do I do to gauge emotional readiness to interpret in any given environment?
3. What mechanisms do I employ to keep my bias in check while interpreting?
4. What does "high profile" mean and how does that definition play a part in my preparations?

References:

- [1] Dean, R.K., & Pollard, R.Q. (2001). Application of demand-control theory to sign language interpreting: Implications for stress and interpreter training. *Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education*, 6, 1-14.
- [2] Kruger, J., & Dunning, D. (1999). Unskilled and unaware of it: How difficulties in recognizing one's own incompetence lead to inflated self-assessments. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 77, 1121-1134.
- [3] Metzger, M. (2011). *Sign language interpreting: Deconstructing the myth of neutrality*. Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press.

About Michael Ballard

Michael B Ballard is a doctoral student at Drake University (Des Moines, Iowa) studying philosophy in education with a personal emphasis on Deaf Education. He also teaches ASL full-time at Iowa State University (Ames) in the department of World Languages and Cultures. When not studying or working, Michael enjoys spending time with his family and watching sports.

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April 2017 Discussion Questions

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1. The article mentioned the author’s personal experiences with interpreters during the birth of his children. Using the general context of Labor & Delivery, apply the Demand Control Schema.
 - a. List some of the Demands for each of the following:
 - i. Environmental
 - ii. Interpersonal
 - iii. Paralinguistic
 - iv. Intrapersonal
 - b. List some of the Controls you could use to approach the Demands you listed above:
2. How might “anosognosia” interfere with an interpreter’s decision on whether or not to accept an assignment?
3. Again using the Labor & Delivery context, how would you respond to each of the pre-assignment questions?
 - a. Do I have sufficient linguistic skill and content knowledge in the necessary languages to meet the needs of this assignment, and to interpret or translate with accuracy and cultural equivalency?
 - b. Am I psychologically and emotionally stable enough to perform the job requisites? Can I interpret without having a negative influence on the parties involved?
 - c. Am I taking this assignment because I’m qualified, or because I want the experience?
 - d. Does my preparation vary based on my views of what kind of Deaf client or position is seen to be “high profile” or not?
 - e. Am I able to keep my bias in check?
4. From the article: What mechanisms do I employ to keep my bias in check while interpreting?
5. From the article: What do I do to gauge emotional readiness to interpret in any given environment?
6. From the article: How might I better solicit meaningful advice and feedback from my clients as a resource to maintain a healthy self-appraisal?