Irish Sign Language Interpreting in Ireland: The Experience of Deaf Students

This article is based on thesis research carried out at the Centre for Deaf Studies, Trinity College Dublin. The purpose of this research was to examine Irish Sign Language (ISL) interpreting within higher education settings in Ireland. This empirical research documents for the first time the experiences of Irish Deaf [1] students, who use ISL as their primary language, working with interpreters in this domain.

This research focuses on Deaf people who availed of an ISL interpreter between the years 2005 and 2015. A total of twenty-seven participants responded to an online questionnaire. The data results indicate that Deaf students prioritise the need for quality interpreting over access and place a high value on the relationship of trust they establish with their interpreter(s). Further exploration of the data reveals that trust is built upon an effective working relationship such as the interpreter acting in a benevolent manner, communicating with the student directly, adjusting signing styles to suit the student and establishing signs for subject-specific terminology.

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this research was to examine Irish Sign Language (ISL) interpreting in higher education (HE) in Ireland. Its focus is from the perspective of the service

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[1]   The word Deaf is capitalised here and throughout the article to refer to those who see themselves as being culturally Deaf, and in this context a member of the Irish Deaf Community.

users, Deaf people who use ISL as their primary language, working with ISL interpreters in HE settings.

The rationale for undertaking research in this particular area is because as a Deaf person (lead author) who has used ISL in HE and been involved in the Deaf community, there was significant anecdotal evidence of substandard interpretation provision in this setting. This led to questioning whether or not this had an impact on Deaf people's learning and overall academic attainment and the issues that arose when using and working with ISL interpreters in the HE domain.

THE IRISH CONTEXT

There is significant under-representation of those who are Deaf or hard of hearing (D/HH) accessing HE. Concerns regarding the participation rates of D/HH people in HE have been expressed in several reports by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) and the Association for Higher Education Access & Disability (AHEAD). In the HEA's National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education, specific targets were set to increase the numbers of Deaf and hard of hearing students in HE (HEA, 2008; 2015).

Table 1 illustrates a positive increase in the number of D/HH students participating in higher education, from sixty-nine in 1994/95 to three hundred and twenty-nine in 2016/17(AHEAD, 2004; 2015; 2016; 2017; 2018)[2]. However, when the number of D/HH students in higher education is viewed as a percentage of the total number of students with disabilities in higher education, the percentage has decreased from 7.1% in 1994/95 to 2.6% in 2016/17.

Learning Through an Interpreter

Research conducted in other countries in various educational settings has shown that poor quality interpretation can have an impact on academic attainment (Marschark et al., 2005a; 2005b; Schick et al., 2006). However, good quality interpretation can have a positive domino effect, not only on academic attainment but also on other elements such as social adjustment and classroom participation (Brooks, 2011). Furthermore, D/HH students are more likely to withdraw from HE compared to students with other disabilities (Treanor et al., 2013).

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[2]   It should be noted that these figures may not give an actual representation of the numbers of D/HH as AHEAD relies on the support services within higher education institutions to respond to the survey which can vary from year to year. In addition, the statistics only reveal those who registered with the support services (i.e. Disability/Access Office).

Table 1: Participation Rates of Deaf/Hard of Hearing Students

Academic Year	Number of Deaf/Hard of Hearing Students	% of Disabled Student Population
1994/95	69	7%
1998/99	81	5.9%
2005/06	192	5.3%
2008/09	206	4.2%
2009/10	207	3.7%
2010/11	235	3.4%
2011/12	220	3.0%
2012/13	288	3.2%
2013/14	271	2.8%
2014/15	277	2.7%
2015/16	313	2.8%
2016/17	329	2.6%

The impact of learning through an interpreter has not been extensively researched. As Deaf students are learning through mediated learning rather than learning directly (Marschark et al., 2005a; Napier and Leeson, 2016), they rely on the interpreter to access course material, academic language and the full curriculum (Schick et al., 1999). Research by Marschark (2004 cited in Marschark et.al., 2005a) revealed that Deaf students comprehend 60-65% of an interpreted lecture compared to 85%-90% of their hearing peers, highlighting that mediated instruction does not fully replicate the impact of direct, non-mediated learning (Marschark et al., 2005b).

Literature on the Deaf Perspective
Very little research has been carried out on Deaf people's experiences of educational interpreters. Brooks's doctoral research in 2011 that included a panel of four Deaf students, attempted to identify strategies for academic success in HE. The consensus from the panel was that the relationship of trust they developed with their interpreter was crucial. Trusting the interpreters meant they enjoyed the lecture more and actively participated in classroom discussions. In line with Napier and Barker's (2004) research, the panel recognised interpreters who had

matched educational backgrounds were more likely to use appropriate voice and sign register and subject-specific vocabulary.

In The Netherlands, studies by de Wit (2011) and de Wit and Sluis (2014) were carried out. In de Wit's (2011) study, seventy participants (fifty-four[3] of whom attended HE) were asked a series of questions regarding interpreters and how they affected their overall quality of life. Respondents commented on the skill level of interpreters in terms of social dynamics, clear articulation, poor sign-to-voice skills and keeping up with the pace. In the second Dutch study carried out in 2014 (de Wit and Sluis), a hundred and ninety Deaf sign language users ranked trust and attitude as two of the most important qualities in an interpreter for educational settings.

FINDINGS

Participant Profile
A total of twenty-seven responses were included in this study. Eighty-nine percent of respondents had not used an ISL interpreter in previous educational settings such as primary or secondary education contexts.

Analysis of Data
The survey was separated into three sections:
- Availability of Interpreters
- Interpreter Quality and Understanding
- General Comments and Feedback

Availability of Interpreters
Twenty-five respondents stated having regular interpreters was important. They argued there was a need for the interpreter to become familiar with the course content. For example; referencing to previous lectures or topics, identifying names, building trust and a relationship and becoming familiar with subject-specific terminology.

Another question asked if there were any issues with punctuality or non-attendance of interpreters and what actions followed this. The majority of the respondents stated they did not have any major issues as replacements were sought and in the

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[3] This is an estimate figure by combining the MBO (three year college), HBO (four year college) and University education grades percentages of both surveys in de Wit's (2011) Netherlands study. (64% of thirty-three = 21.2) + (89% of thirty-seven = 32.93) = 54.

case of one respondent, the missed hours were transferred to tutorial hours. For those who did experience issues with punctuality, they reported it to the Disability/Access Office or raised it directly with the interpreter. In case of non-attendance, students stated they stayed at home and did not attend lectures if the interpreter informed them in advance. Students who were not informed in advance, reported that they were not able to understand the lecture, and that they could not leave the classroom until it was appropriate to do so. One respondent stated

> "...sometimes I found out in the class meaning I was stuck throughout the class with no clue of what the lecture was about, then if it was question time or group discussion, it was even more awkward for me with no idea!"

Interpreter Quality & Understanding

In this section, there were two questions using a rating and ranking scale. The first question, as depicted in Figure 1, provided participants with a list of statements about their overall experience of using interpreters in HE. They were asked to rate these statements as Poor, Fair, Average, Good or Excellent.

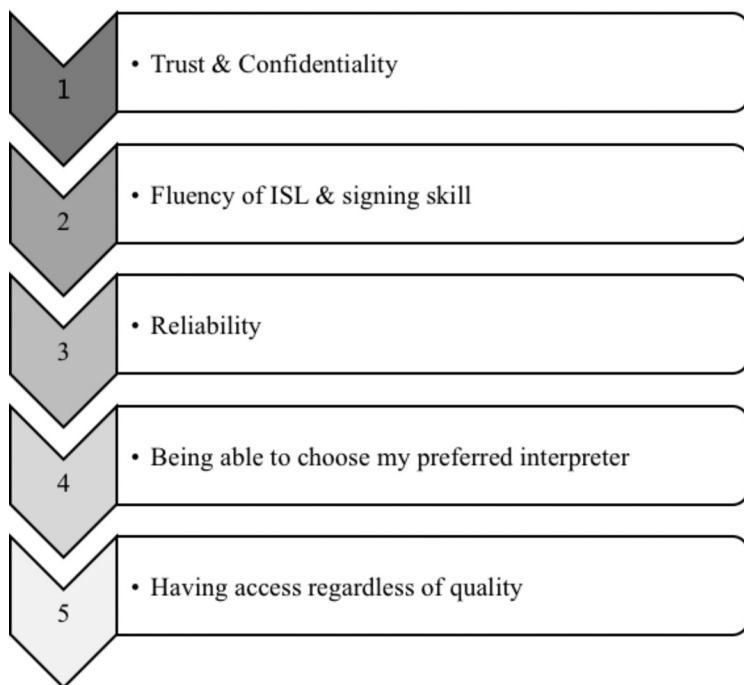**Figure 1: The Interpreter Rating Statements**
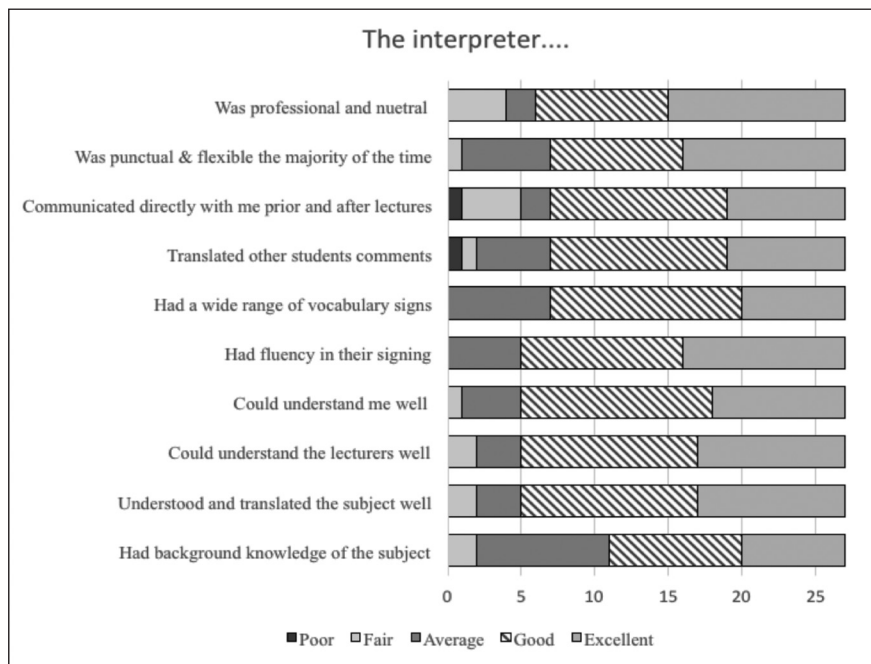
Five out of twenty-seven participants rated the interpreter as 'Excellent' in the majority of statements (at least five out of nine) and had a tendency to then rate the interpreter as 'Good' in the remaining statements. Four participants who rated the interpreter as 'Average' in the majority tended to rate the interpreter as 'Fair' or 'Good' in other statements. This shows us that participants' experiences of using interpreters can vary from person to person.

Participants were then asked to rank statements in order of 1 to 5, with 1 being the most important and 5 being the least important. This was a forced ranking question in which respondents could only select one number per statement.

Figure 2, shows us that the most important attribute when using ISL interpreters was 'Trust and Confidentiality" with seventeen respondents ranking this as the number one most important attribute statement, while 'Having access regardless of the quality' was deemed to be the least important attribute statement.

Figure 2: Interpreter Attributes Ranking

1. • Trust & Confidentiality
2. • Fluency of ISL & signing skill
3. • Reliability
4. • Being able to choose my preferred interpreter
5. • Having access regardless of quality

General Comments and Feedback

The final section of the questionnaire comprised three open-ended questions to allow respondents to elaborate further on their experiences. Firstly, participants commented on their overall experience of using ISL interpreters in HE. Generally respondents were positive; saying they were provided with the opportunity to be educated through ISL, how they felt "fortunate" and that they were able to recognise the differences in having skilled or experienced interpreters compared to newly trained interpreters. Respondents stated
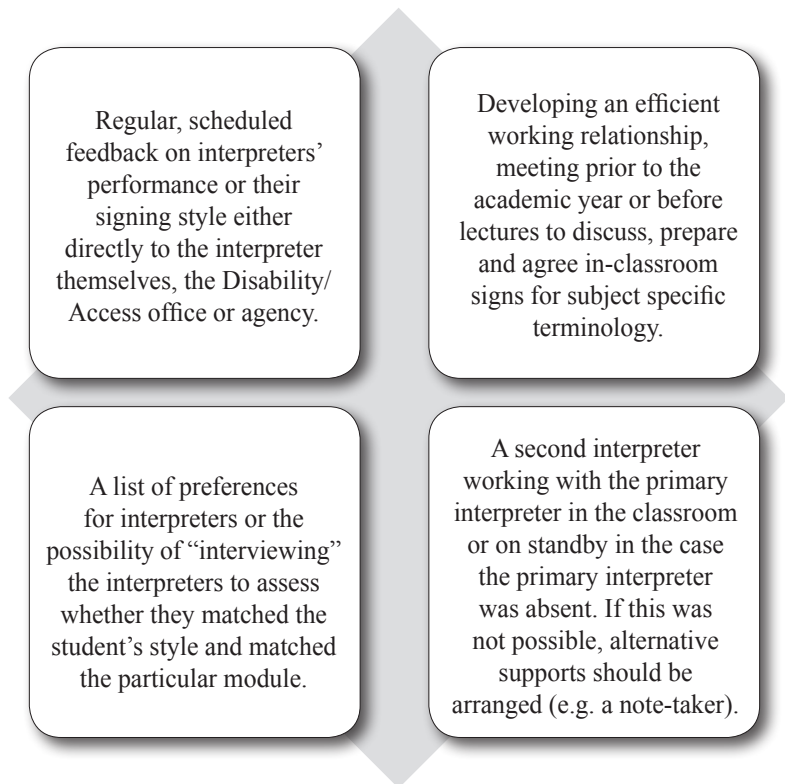
> "Overall, I have been through top-qualified interpreters to just-out-of-college interpreters and the difference is huge. I want interpreters to be divided into experience, knowledge and these to be connected to their eligibility to interpret in certain modules."

> "I recognised who were the better quality ISL interpreters…. Two ISL interpreters had skills from their background which suited my modules. One was great in translating my ISL into written English…"

Secondly, participants were asked if they ever had the opportunity to give a review or feedback of using ISL interpreters, whether positive or negative, either to the Disability/Access Office, interpreting agency or directly to the interpreter themselves. Almost half of the respondents said they did not give feedback on their experiences, some stating that they would have liked the opportunity to do so. Two respondents said they raised a complaint only once as they had bad experiences with their identities being revealed to the interpreters which caused "bad feelings" and "awkwardness" throughout the rest of their course. Others felt it was the responsibility of the Disability/Access Office to resolve any issues but one respondent felt the Disability/Access Office lacked awareness about the qualities and preference for a particular interpreter.

Lastly, participants were asked to reflect on, if they were to start their HE experience again, what three things they would do when using and working with ISL interpreters. There was much overlap in all twenty-seven responses: Figure 3 below shows the key pieces of advice from Deaf people who completed the survey.

Figure 3: Advice on Using ISL Interpreters in Higher Education

Regular, scheduled feedback on interpreters' performance or their signing style either directly to the interpreter themselves, the Disability/ Access office or agency.

Developing an efficient working relationship, meeting prior to the academic year or before lectures to discuss, prepare and agree in-classroom signs for subject specific terminology.

A list of preferences for interpreters or the possibility of "interviewing" the interpreters to assess whether they matched the student's style and matched the particular module.

A second interpreter working with the primary interpreter in the classroom or on standby in the case the primary interpreter was absent. If this was not possible, alternative supports should be arranged (e.g. a note-taker).

DISCUSSION

The Current Climate of Higher Education

When Deaf people enrol in mainstream HE settings, it is often the first time that they use an educational interpreter. The data gathered in this study revealed a lack of clarity or awareness of the various stakeholders' roles (i.e. Deaf student, the Disability/Access Office, ISL interpreter, interpreting agency and the lecturer) around educational interpreting. Respondents stated that they felt the need for some training in how to manage the working relationship between themselves and the interpreter. For example; boundary management (not to become too over-reliant on interpreters during breaks which can lead to a lack of developing friendships with

their peers), how to address concerns or issues with an interpreter and putting trust in an interpreter in voicing over their comments within the classroom to match their register (Schick et al., 2006). This reflects de Wit's (2011) and Brooks's (2011) findings where the student could choose not to actively participate in classroom discussions if there was a question over the ability of the interpreter's sign-to-voice skills.

There is a need to understand that there are varying skill levels among ISL interpreters, and this is the reason why students sometimes express a preference for certain interpreters. This is backed up by all previous studies mentioned in the literature review; a need for the interpreter to match the educational setting to ensure that the Deaf student has access to the same information as their hearing peers (Brooks, 2011; de Wit and Sluis, 2014).

Effective Working Relationships
Research findings by Brooks (2011) and de Wit and Sluis (2014) highlighted trust as one of the most crucial aspects of Deaf students' experience when working with educational interpreters as they felt it contributed to their overall academic attainment. The attribute statement 'Trust and Confidentiality', was ranked the most important aspect of using educational interpreters in Irish HE. Seventeen out of twenty-seven respondents all marked this as being the number one attribute statement. Trust that there will be communication if an interpreter is delayed, trust that the interpreter has the right skill-set to represent the Deaf student when voicing over and trust that the interpreter is willing to engage in a collaborate working relationship to make the interpreting process easier. However, this aspect is more difficult to establish if Deaf students have different (irregular) interpreters or a large interpreting team.

Skill Level of ISL Interpreters
The skill level of ISL interpreters working in HE is hard to determine as many Deaf people have their own preferences and some prefer a lower skilled interpreter simply because of the trust that has been established previously (Brooks, 2011). Nevertheless 'Fluency of ISL and Signing Skill' was rated as being the second most important attribute after trust (Figure 2). A highly skilled interpreter comes with experience, familiarity of the subject and the lexical and linguistic knowledge in their interpretation of classroom discourse (Schick et al., 1999; 2006).

It has been argued that the academicization of the Irish Deaf community (Krausnecker, 2001 cited in Leeson, 2010) has only just begun in the past decade. Therefore the landscape of educational interpreting is changing. Deaf and hard of

hearing students are now enrolled in all fields of study, compared to two decades ago when they mainly studied in the Arts and Humanities field (AHEAD, 2018). This newfound exposure and access to new vocabulary and terminology could mean there is no sign in ISL for that particular lexical item simply because it was rarely used, if ever it was used, in the Irish Deaf community. This leads to the Deaf student and the interpreter having to create their own signs for subject-specific terminology which in turn creates less lag time resulting in improved representation of classroom discourse.

CONCLUSION

'Trust and Confidentiality' was the most important attribute for Deaf students when working with an ISL interpreter. This includes the interpreter informing the Deaf student if they are unavailable or running late so as to avoid feelings of embarrassment. Being able to trust the interpreter means Deaf students are more likely to participate in classroom discourse as they are comfortable that the interpreter will voice them appropriately. The need for using regular interpreters throughout their course was highlighted. This contributes to an effective working relationship whereby ISL interpreters become familiar with the content and signs for subject-specific terminology are created. This would produce shorter lag times leading to a better representation of discourse in the classroom. Respondents explained that ISL interpreters with background subject knowledge gave a better interpretation which led to a better understanding of the subject by the Deaf student.

This empirical research is the first of its kind in Ireland and it is hoped that further research will be conducted. As a consequence, more Deaf people will have successful academic attainment in HE which in turn would lead to an expansion in the number of Deaf professionals within the Irish Deaf community.

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