

# The Interpreter/Captionist: Integrating ASL and English in Academic Settings

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## Abstract

A new challenge opened up for Miami-Dade Community College when Deaf students, who had previously received sign language interpretation as their support service, began requesting real-time captioning. Reasons for wanting to change their traditional support mainly involved concerns with access to the English vocabulary used in the classroom. Implementing this change proved more complicated than merely a substituting a captionist for a sign language interpreter. Interpretation was still needed.

The program staff decided to train sign language interpreters to become captionists. This paper will address the following issues: (1) student concerns with their previous services; (2) the rationale for the decisions; (3) how the college implements the use of both interpreting and captioning, sometimes both within the same class; and (4) student response to this new service delivery model.

Many Deaf college students are readily provided access to classroom information with sign language interpreters. However, those students who are late-deafened or orally educated have not benefited as well through the traditional method of using oral interpreters. Real-time captioning now offers a superior service to this special population.

In the process of providing real-time captioning to students, Miami-Dade Community College ran into many new challenges. Among the selection of services such as CART, C-Print™, TypeWell, or something else not yet identified, which system should be selected? What criteria should be used to make this selection? Who should provide the service: interpreters, secretaries, or court reporters? How should it be delivered: contracting with an agency, using existing staff, or hiring new staff? Who should receive the service? Should it be limited only to those students who cannot benefit from any other service, or should it be open to any student who requests it? Should it be available only for certain courses?

The program staff researched current real-time captioning systems; developed criteria that would fit the students' needs; and decided to train interpreters to provide the service. Because of student concerns with their current services, they offered the real-time captioning service to any student who made a request for it.

In order to implement the service, however, the program staff found that it was not as simple as merely substituting a captionist for a sign language interpreter. New decisions had to be made according to several issues:

1. *Subject matter.* Math and some science courses can be difficult to caption.
2. *Classroom activity.* Discussion groups are not always easily captioned.
3. *Technology used in the classroom.* Captioning sometimes has to be adapted when using "Smart Classrooms" or working with other media.
4. *Teacher attitudes.* Certain teachers complained that the captioning equipment took away from the 'human' element of natural expressive language.
5. *Student considerations.* Students may change their minds about the service after a period of time.

Some of these decisions are still evolving during negotiations about students' access to classroom information, classroom discourse, socialization with teachers and peers, and access to printed English.

## Background

Oral deaf students needed access to classroom lectures. The program staff had tried oral interpreters and notetakers, and assigned two notetakers in each class to offer what was hoped to be fairly comprehensive class notes. The students, however, did not find these services to be satisfactory. They decided that real-time captioning would fill this need.

Miami-Dade Community College provided meeting space for court reporters to learn CART in a workshop. They contracted with a CART provider to transcribe in the classes of the oral deaf students. As soon as the CART transcriptionists started showing up on campus, the Deaf students who had been using sign language interpreters began requesting captioning services. There were double the number of requests than originally projected.

The signing Deaf students had a variety of reasons for requesting captioning in lieu of interpreting:

1. The students felt they were missing key vocabulary from the classroom lectures. Fingerspelling was not always adequate, because it was fleeting and still required processing of the fingerspelling to the word in printed English.

2. They wanted the transcripts to study from because they were much more thorough than the notetakers' notes.

3. Key phrases/sentences from the lectures often showed up on the tests. It was easier to recognize them in print than to rely on memory and translation from the interpretation.

4. Certain courses, such as English Composition, Reading, and Grammar, were easier to access through English in text form than through ASL (interpreted or transliterated).

### **Providing the Service**

The CART contracting was successful, but not a long-term solution. For what was being spent per semester, the college could hire its own captionists and provide an 'in-house' service. This way, there was more control over the hiring criteria of the captionists and greater flexibility in scheduling. This also eliminated the extra time needed for contract negotiations and billing. The program staff began to consider who they would hire, which system (or systems) they would use, and whether or not they would train the captionists or look for people who were already trained.

### **Deciding Which System to Use**

The program staff explored several systems, and decided against a verbatim system. Being a community college, there were many students taking 'pre-college' courses or vocational-type courses. A summary-type system is helpful for students who struggle with reading, or who are trying to improve their reading skills. The summary-type systems are also adaptable in their presentation: captionists can take the spoken discourse of the instructor and revise it into captions that read more like written discourse. For literate Deaf students, this is much easier to follow.

Miami-Dade Community College chose C-Print™ specifically for several reasons: (1) there was a training session being offered at the time it was needed; (2) it was relatively easy to learn, enabling new captionists to be trained quickly; and (3) there was financial support for training through PEPNet stipends.

### **Selecting Prospective Trainees**

When selecting prospective trainees, several issues were considered:

1. *Administrative.* Program staff members were unsure as to whether they would be able to establish a "new" position (captionist) expediently. They decided to train existing staff members and add "captioning"

to their "other duties as assigned". The interpreter/captionists receive their regular rate of pay for captioning; however, there are a greater number of course offerings for them than for those interpreters who do not caption.

2. *Candidate selection.* Sign language interpreters already have the processing skills and knowledge of working with Deaf students. Both are critical skills for captionists.

3. *Incentives to participate.* The college made a commitment to the program and paid all participants for their on-site training. Full-time staff received leave time and compensatory time; part-time staff received their regular hourly rate. The college also purchased equipment for each trained captionist.

4. *Availability.* Most trainees were available in the evenings. One of the full-time advisors was also chosen for the training, because he is available during business hours and could conceivably provide class coverage in emergency situations.

### **Criteria for Service Provision to the Students**

The program staff developed criteria for who would receive the captioning services. They considered issues such as testing the students for a certain reading level, offering it for certain courses, providing captioning according to the students' grades when they had used captioning in the past, etc. They decided that this seemed discriminatory and unfair. Since this was a new service and Kendall Campus was the first campus to provide it, it would be impossible to demonstrate that a student needed to show previous success with captioning, if the student had never used it before. If one of the goals was to use the captioning to help the Deaf students with their reading; why would they be cut off just because their reading levels were low? The service was open to any Deaf student who requested it, pending availability of a captionist.

In scheduling the captionists, since all of them were already interpreters, the service schedule was not affected if a Deaf student selected one service over the other. The student could conceivably get the same person as his/her interpreter *or* captionist. However, students who specifically requested interpretation were usually given an interpreter who does not caption.

### **Providing the Service**

Students are advised and given a demonstration of the service prior to receiving C-Print™ for the first time. They make a separate decision for each course of whether they want an interpreter or captioning. Then they are offered choices as to what their captioning/notes will look like: outline form or verbatim-style; leave in or leave out digressive comments; bold or italicize the vocabulary, announcements, assignments, due dates, etc; add headings or not; include information

written on the board or not font (size and style); etc. The other decision that students make is what kind of expressive communication they will use: voice for themselves or sign and have the interpreter/captionist voice for them.

### **Advantages to the Interpreter/Captionist Role**

The Code of Ethics is the same in regard to confidentiality, professionalism, impartiality, and message equivalency.

1. Students feel comfortable because they can communicate easily with their captionists.
2. Classroom activities within a single class can be captioned (i.e.: the lecture) or interpreted (i.e.: the small group discussions), depending on which is more accessible for the student.
3. Students can change their minds about which service to use, depending on class format.
4. Students are not held to one support service for all of their classes. They report that switching from captioning to interpreting (during the same class or from class to class) is less visually fatiguing than watching captioning all day.
5. Students report that the interpreter/captionists include facial expressions that provide additional information.
6. For the interpreter/captionist, switching back and forth between interpreting and captioning seems to be less physically stressful.
7. If the equipment breaks down, sign language or oral interpreting can be used as a back-up service.

### **Challenges**

1. Certain courses are difficult to caption (e.g.: some math and science courses) due to extensive board work with simultaneous explanations, or use of symbols and graphics.
2. Captioning has to be adapted when using “smart classrooms” or working with other media.
3. Some faculty members complain that the captioning equipment takes away from the “human” element of communicating in a natural, expressive language (such as American Sign Language).
4. It may be necessary to negotiate with instructors and students for the consecutive use of captioning and interpreting.

### **Current Status and Looking to the Future**

Almost every Deaf student who uses captioning for a portion of his/her academic schedule has been satisfied with the service. In the three semesters of use, the overall grade point average of Deaf students has increased, and the number of course withdrawals and failures have decreased. Faculty use the notes for their own reference to use with students who are absent on a certain day, and as support for when (or if) information/assignments were announced.

The college is considering sponsoring more training sessions to train new captionists and to provide updated training to current captionists. In addition, program staff members are working on extending captioned classes to “sister” campuses through distance technology, using the campus network

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