

## The Necessity of Offering Sign Language Interpretation as an Academic Concentration in Bti Program in China

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**Abstract:** This paper clarifies the necessity of offering this academic direction in BTI program from the following several aspects: the limited ability of vocational education and the training courses, the similarities between sign language interpretation and spoken language interpretation, the incomplete understanding of “interpretation” and isolated research on “sign language interpretation” and the benefits of offering this academic direction in BTI program concerning the professionalization of sign language interpretation.

### 1. Introduction

In China, there are about at least 20.57 million hearing-impaired people. But the sign language interpreters serving them are far less. According to Deputy General Secretary of Beijing Sign Language Association Zhao Juan, there are 190 thousand hearing-impaired people in Beijing, but only 50 sign language interpreters have passed the National Certification of Sign Language Interpreter. At present, sign language interpreters are mainly deaf school teachers, and some come from organizations of disabled people's federations at all levels. Although the total number of sign language interpreters is more than 2000, only about 20 people can reach the highest standards of “foreign interpretation, recognition by the deaf, and proficient use of sign language”, accounting for only one-tenth of all the interpreters, so the market gap for high-level sign language interpreters is huge.

Sign language interpretation is treated as an emerging profession in China, and it became officially established in 2007 when Ministry of Labor and Social Security announced this new occupation. Before this, Zhengzhou Institute of Technology in Henan province had already made it a major for three-year vocational education in 2004, followed by Nanjing Normal University of Special Education in 2005 and Yingkou Vocational and Technical College in Liaoning province in 2011. The total number of students majoring in sign language interpretation in these three universities and college are around 1500 till now and the result is nothing but shocking: the sign language interpretation majors produced from the above mentioned universities and college is extremely insignificant and negligible when confronting more than 20 million deaf or hearing-impaired people.

The problem also persists in the case of sign language interpretation training. Some provinces in China do have training institutions, but the courses provided differ greatly with the course lasting for several days to several months and the content ranges from teaching some signs to interpretation skills. To cite Feiyu Training Course of Beijing as an example, the teaching content includes: finger spelling, signs of daily supplies, the time, verbs, adjectives, function words, idioms as well as basic signs in all walks of life without touching interpretation skills or the like and the teaching falls on the weekend at 18:00-20:00 which lasts only for 2 months.

So, It is clear that though the above two universities and one college have sign language interpretation major, and many training institutions could be found, most of which are test-oriented and not professional, the courses being given are extremely limited, only covering several major subjects while culture of the deaf, public speaking skills as well as other related subjects are usually omitted and the quality, length or the scope vary greatly, from a one-month course in learning some basic signs to a major isolated from the scope of interpretation running three years. Thus it is time for sign language interpretation major to be listed under a more professional and higher education-

BTI(Bachelor of Translation and Interpreting) program.

## **2. The Necessity of Offering Sign Language Interpretation as an Academic Concentration in Bti Program in China**

### **2.1 Similarities between Sign Language Interpretation and Spoken Language Interpretation**

Some may think that sign language interpretation and spoken language interpretation differ obviously in many aspects, however, the underlying cognitive processing, the roles interpreters play and the abilities required of them as well as the quality assessment criteria of interpretation are overwhelmingly similar regardless of language pair.

#### **2.1.1 Cognitive Processing**

Isham and Lane note that as for cognitive processing, nothing could prove sign language interpretation is different from spoken language interpretation when interpreting American Sign Language into English or from the opposite direction. From the perspective of cognitive science, both sign language interpretation and spoken language interpretation involve comprehension mechanism, attention control mechanism, memory mechanism, code switching, information monitoring and so on. The cognitive process of both sign language interpretation and spoken language interpretation contain the receiving and analyzing of the source language, highly efficient memorizing, decoding and coding, planning and production of the target language, monitoring of the outgoing message and self-correcting.

Based on information transferring mode, both sign language interpretation and spoken language interpretation can be performed simultaneously or consecutively. Though in the simultaneous mode, spoken language interpreters have to depend on specialized simultaneous interpretation facility and in the consecutive mode, sign language interpreters never take notes, the cognitive process of the two are highly similar. According to Gile's Effort Model, simultaneous interpreters have to appropriately distribute the limited cognitive resource into four concurrent cognitive tasks: the listening and analysis effort, the speech production effort, the short-term memory effort and the coordination effort. If the interpreters fail to distribute his/her attention appropriately to the above four tasks, he/she will catch one at the expense of another. Similarly, sign language interpreters also have to undergo the above mentioned multitasking in the simultaneous interpreting process. To apply the Model into sign language interpretation, the four concurrent cognitive tasks will be the listening/observing and analysis effort, the speech/sign language production effort, the short-term memory effort and the coordination effort. For example, when interpreting spoken language into sign language, the interpreter has to appropriately distribute the limited attention into listening and analyzing the incoming message, memorizing some of the information, organizing and producing sign language, self-refining as well as other tasks.

From this point, sign language interpretation and spoken language interpretation do have similar cognitive processing.

#### **2.1.2 Roles Interpreters Play and the Abilities Required**

Both sign language interpreters and spoken language interpreters have been referred to as the "helper", "communication facilitator", "conduit", "bilingual, bicultural specialist" (Roy, 2002). At the early stage, when sign language interpreters are mostly relatives or friends of the deaf and come for no money, they are called "helpers" (Frishberg, 1986). As time goes by, they are called "communication facilitator" or the like; there are no difference between sign language interpreters and spoken language interpreters.

Abilities required of sign language and spoken language interpreters are similar as well. First of all, the interpreters should have skilled language proficiency. Both for sign language and spoken language interpreters, strong bilingual or multilingual ability forms the basic requirement and mastery of characteristics of different languages, large vocabulary, excellent listening ability as well as great language sense all contribute to quick and accurate wording, phrasing and building of the

sentence. Strong sign language recognition ability is required additionally of sign language interpreters. Secondly, the interpreters should have a good command of interpretation skills. Just as Zhang Weiwei states in his book *EC (English-Chinese) Simultaneous Interpretation*, the commonly used techniques for spoken language interpreters includes segmenting, waiting, conversing of word classes, repetition, supplementing, omitting, and negative proposing and so on. Likely, those techniques are often applied in sign language interpretation. Thirdly, the interpreters should have a good memory. Since no chance is given to the interpreters for them to consult a dictionary or ask help from others when interpreting is in progress, they have to memorize a large number of vocabularies (including terminologies), idioms, allusions as well as acronyms in advance and activate them. In addition, the interpreters have to reproduce the message from one language into another as accurately as they can. So, they have to bear huge memory load which makes the interpreting work extremely hard. Though notes may help in consecutive mode for spoken language interpreters, memory plays a predominant role in the whole process. While for sign language interpreters, note-taking is not a part of consecutive interpretation and memory takes effect throughout the whole process.

It is no denying that the roles both sign language and spoken language interpreters play are similar and the abilities required of them are also nearly the same.

### **2.1.3 Interpretation Quality and Assessment**

Both sign language and spoken language interpretation involve issue of quality. Discussion on this will be helpful in finding the similarity between the two.

Wang Jihong puts in her paper that sign language and spoken language interpretation quality depends on many variables, such as environmental factors (the light, background of the rostrum), factors related to the experience (familiarity of the interpreter to the speech topic, the interpreter's scope of knowledge), language features (accents; language proficiency, style or logic of the speaker; language direction; slip of the tongue/hand), physical and mental condition of the interpreters (illness, fatigue, fear, anxiety or distraction), technical factors (the way using the microphone, the condition of acoustics/video effects), characteristics of the incoming message (message type and information density) and time factors (running hour of the interpreters) .

Despite the fact that interpretation quality may be assessed differently from different subjective perspectives, considerable agreements on a number of criteria assessing interpretation quality stand out. Concepts such as accuracy, clarity, completeness, fluency as well as professionalism are invariably deemed essential. The core criteria of interpretation quality are associated with the product-oriented perspective and focus primarily on the interpretation or target-text as “a ‘faithful’ image” (Gile, 1991) or “exact and faithful production” (Jones, 1998) of the original discourse. The criterion of clarity (or linguistic acceptability, stylistic correctness, etc) is another aspect of quality assessment, which could be regarded more generally as “listener orientation” or target-text comprehensibility. Besides, both sign language and spoken language interpreters are expected to “represent fully” the original speaker and his/her interests and intentions (Gile, 1991). To this end, completeness falls into category of quality assessment criteria. As the role of both sign language and spoken language interpreters is to facilitate the communication and make it successful, the focus of quality assessment may not only on the listeners' comprehension or the speakers' intention but on the process of communicative interaction as such and in this case, quality essentially means a successful and smooth communication among interacting parties and fluency plays a significant part in this respect. From the position of an observer, professionalism of an interpreter delivers the most intuitionistic impression of whether the interpreter is acceptable or not, which may affect further judgment on certain interpreters.

As indicated above, the core criteria underlying interpretation quality assessment ranging from accuracy, clarity, completeness to fluency and professionalism are all applicable to both sign language and spoken language interpretation.

Owing to the similarities between sign language interpretation and spoken language interpretation, it is reasonable to offer this new academic direction within a broad scope of BTI

program.

## 2.2 To Make the Meaning of “Interpretation” and Its Research as Well as Its Teaching Complete

*Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English (Sixth Edition)* explains “interpret” as: to translate one language into another as you hear it. It should be pointed out that the word “language” in the definition of “interpret” here contains sign language since the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* passed in the 61st General Assembly explicitly states that: language contains oral, signed as well as other non-phonetic forms.

It is obvious that the definition of “interpretation” includes sign language, demonstrating sign language interpretation to be an essential part of interpretation. Ingram notes that sign language interpretation is an integral part of the study of interpretation and description of interpretation failing to take account of sign language interpretation could not be regarded as complete. Wang Jihong also mentions in *Chinese Journal of Special Education* that “interpreting has two modes: one is spoken-language interpreting and the other is sign-language interpreting.

As all of the above admit that interpretation contains sign language interpretation and it is incomplete and not fair for universities to offer spoken language interpretation and translation programs while sign language interpretation is neglected. Besides, offering sign language interpretation as an academic concentration in BTI program will be strong information sending to the general public that sign language interpretation is an essential part of interpretation.

Similarly, the research on “interpretation” should not neglect sign language interpretation. However, articles about sign language interpretation could hardly be spotted in top journals of translation or interpretation in China such as *China Translators Journal* or *Shanghai Journal of Translators for Science and Technology*. Sign language interpretation is usually the topic of *Chinese Journal of Special Education*, which demonstrates an isolation of the researches on sign language interpretation from interpretation and this must be changed as sign language and spoken language interpretation are of the same family and should be studied in the same field. Offering such an academic concentration under BTI program will surely attract attention of the researchers and urge them to reconsider the relationship between sign language interpretation and spoken-language interpretation, promoting the integrated study of “interpretation” by taking sign language interpretation into consideration.

As mentioned before, only one university and two colleges have sign language interpretation major as vocational education. Though many training institutions could be found, most of which are test-oriented and not professional, the courses being given are extremely limited, and the learning usually last from a one-month course in learning some basic signs to a college-level major running three years. So, adding this new direction in higher education will surely pave the way for more professional training and guarantee a more systematic and complete teaching structure.

In a word, offering sign language interpretation as an academic concentration in BTI program will be a strong indicator that sign language interpretation is a part of interpretation and hence completes its meaning. If this has been done, the integrated study of spoken language interpretation and sign language interpretation will be realized and the teaching of interpretation will sure be completed.

## 2.3 To Quicken the Professionalization of Sign Language Interpretation

One of the main purposes of higher education is to cultivate specialized talents that reflect the needs of the society. As the field of sign language interpretation is just evolving and increasing importance is being attached, it is an irresistible trend to add sign language interpretation as an academic concentration in BTI program in higher education and quicken its professionalization.

Just as the name suggests, BTI program aims to cultivate specialized talents with a solid language foundation, extensive cultural knowledge, and skilled interpreting and translation skills, capable of translation/interpreting work in foreign affairs, commerce, technology, culture, education and other departments, and provide excellent students for MTI (Master of Translation and Interpreting) and doctoral education. It will provide a more formal and professional educational

structure for the students, and the credentials, degrees as well as certificates offered allow them to acquire education background that are recognized in a formal manner upon graduate. BTI program usually offers translation courses like English-Chinese translation skills, Chinese-English translation skills, literary translation, business translation, scientific translation, legal translation, travel translation, news translation, computer-aided translation, etc. And the interpretation courses include audiovisual translation, accompanying interpretation, government interpretation, business interpretation, and Introduction to audio interpretation, and other professional electives that are closely related to interpretation ability. So, it is clear that they are designed in accordance with the social demand which is as comprehensive and professional as possible and such educational courses equip the students with a wide range of necessary skills and professionalism while preparing them to deliver high-quality service in the future work. Offering sign language interpretation in BTI program can surely play a part in promoting the professionalization of sign language interpretation.

Besides, it must be noted that sign language interpreters are facing many challenges such as floating, unstable and low wages, a scarcity of full-time job and the lack of a comprehensive career path. The current pay level will inevitably force individuals who are working in this field out of the occupation and turn to other alternative fields. What's more, few positions are provided for sign language interpreters as full-time jobs guarantees no stability. All problems mentioned greatly affect the professionalization of sign language interpretation. Thus, increasing the availability of specialized courses is extremely important and represents only the first step in removing the obstacles and addressing the challenges facing those who are working with and on behalf of the deaf or hearing-impaired people. It is also the first step to quicken the professionalization of sign language interpretation. The next step comes to develop a comprehensive career ladder and a system that offers sign language interpreters the opportunity of taking advantage of their specialized higher education experience in subsequent positions.

Thus, offering sign language interpretation as an academic concentration in BTI program will be helpful in promoting the professionalization of this occupation.

### **3. Conclusion**

From what has been discussed above, reasons for offering sign language interpretation in BTI program are as follows: vocational education and training courses could be greatly backed up when this has been done. And there exist similarities between sign language and spoken language interpretation. What's more, the meaning of interpretation along with its teaching and research would be completed if sign language interpretation be offered in BTI program. And finally, the professionalization of sign language interpretation could be promoted thanks to this.

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