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PRINCIPLES OF INTERPRETING FOR DEAF PEOPLE

By JEROME D. SCHEIN, Ph.D., Director, Deafness Research & Training Center, New York University

During the Sixties interpreting took a great leap forward, from a *favor* granted by a few knowledgeable hearing people to a recognized *right* of deaf people performed by qualified persons. The establishment of the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf institutionalized this significant change. Speaking at a workshop in 1964, Mr. Frederick Scheiber described the minimum requirements for interpreters: "They must be able to hear; they must be able to sign; they must be willing; and they must be available."¹

In the past eight years many efforts have been made to improve upon the situation Mr. Schreiber described. Interpreting is now generally accepted as a valuable service, deserving monetary compensation. Here and there a few persons are devoting their full time to interpreting. Nationwide, however, a critical shortage of interpreters exists. And there are few sustained, formal programs to develop and improve interpreting skills.

A number of years ago Dr. Lottie Riekehof, then with New York University's Deafness Research & Training Center, began a series of workshops aimed at developing an interpreter curriculum. After Dr. Riekehof left to become Dean of Women at Gallaudet College, the task of bringing the program to fruition fell to Mrs. Carol Tipton, Mr. Martin Sternberg and myself. Last Fall we held a meeting with Mr. Emil Ladner, Executive Director of the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID), Mr. Albert Pimentel, former head of RID, Mr. Terrence O'Rourke, head of the Communicative Skills Program of the National Association of the Deaf, and Dr. Riekehof. We agreed upon the necessity for a course on principles of interpreting.

Participants in the course would be expected to already have proficiency in manual communication. We saw no need to duplicate the

¹Frederick Schreiber. *Address. Workshop on Interpreting for the Deaf, June 14-17, 1964. Ball State Teachers College, Muncie, Indiana, page 35.*

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extensive efforts now underway in teaching manual communications.² (As a matter of fact, New York University also has had for several years a two-course sequence, including a laboratory section, to develop proficiency in communicating with deaf persons.) Instead, the new course we planned would prepare people who could sign to become interpreters. So, in January of this year, we began to field test ideas we had put together about interpreter training.

The organization of the course can be conceived as a large circle surrounding a group of smaller circles (see Figure 1). The outer ring contains

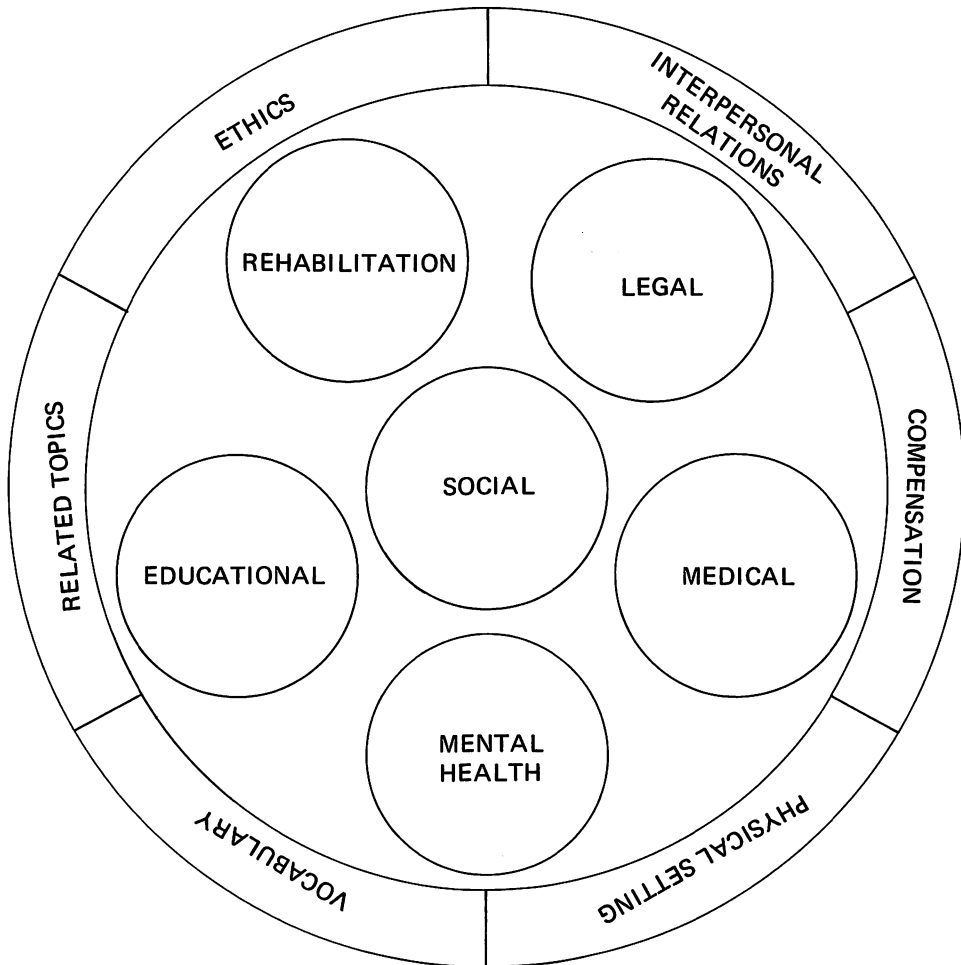


Figure 1
SCHEMATIC REPRESENTATION OF INTERPRETER TRAINING PROGRAM:
DEAFNESS RESEARCH & TRAINING CENTER
NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

²*Communicative Skills Program, National Association of the Deaf, 814 Thayer Avenue, Silver Spring, Maryland 20910.*

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the principles in a relatively abstract form. Each of the smaller circles repeats the abstract principles as applied to relatively concrete areas of interpreting. Let me be specific.

The first principles concerning ethics and general deportment. Not very much attention has been given in the literature to this topic, probably because so many interpreters were associated with church groups and their exemplary behavior was taken for granted. But there are many borderline problems, involving protection of confidentiality, self-seeking efforts by interpreters, paternalistic attitudes and practices, and much more. In dealing with these problems we sought diverse points of view. We recognize that the RID itself has not taken a definitive position on many of the issues which arose in our discussions. Our aim has been to open these issues to discussion, looking forward to the time when the RID will set forth policies covering each of the issues.

A closely related second area is that of client-interpreter relations. Here we are concerned with the role of the interpreter—Is he also a tutor, friend, legal counsel, vocational-guidance expert, etc.? — as well as with rapport. Like the ethical and behavioral problems, the questions surrounding the relationship between the deaf person and the interpreter do not seem to have been widely discussed in the past. We found many intriguing points of difference, not only among interpreters but also among deaf persons. Interpreters may be regarded as “only a pair of hands and ears” or as advocates, instructors, and social companions, in addition to being interpreters.

The questions dealing with compensation were not too bothersome. The majority of deaf persons now accept the idea that interpreters are paid for service. That is not to say that problems do not arise, but rather that there was general agreement on how these matters should be resolved.

Moving away from the interpersonal relations, management of the setting came next. The recent monograph edited by Dr. Glenn Lloyd³ provided some good material for discussion. Interpreters are either already alert to lighting problems and their own positioning with respect to speaker and audience, or quick to learn these points. A good deal of discussion did develop as to who should be responsible for making adequate arrangements. You will grasp the direction of these debates from the proposal by one participant that interpreters carry a kit containing spotlights, a box to stand on, and other paraphernalia often needed to make the interpreter visible to the audience.

Vocabulary, or more properly, correct signs captured less attention than it seems to have attracted in other workshops. The many new dictionaries of signs are helping to standardize the language. Tolerance for new signs is growing. There was also general recognition of the necessity for

³Lloyd, Glenn T. (Ed.) *Guidelines for Effective Participation of Deaf Persons in Professional Meetings*. Knoxville, Tennessee: University of Tennessee, 1971.

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the interpreter to predetermine the client's preferences and level of comprehension.

The course also took up organizational information and bibliographical resources. For those planning to make interpreting a career, these matters are naturally important. Even for those who pursue interpreting as an avocation, a knowledge about the organizations of and for deaf persons and the literature on interpreting is valuable.

Now from these general principles the course has moved to specific situations: educational, legal, medical, etc. In each case the principles are tested against the peculiar features inherent in the particular setting. This strategy seems pedagogically sound, though some of the participants are not finding sufficient new material in each session to support their interest.

We have also had a separate session dealing with oral and with reverse interpreting. The latter, in particular, is worth far more attention than we originally planned to give to it. The wide range of sign-language skills an interpreter encounters requires extensive education and/or experience when he must verbalize for the deaf person.

During the past six months we have received a steady stream of requests for the course materials. We plan to distribute them in July through the RID. While we cannot blame Mr. Ladner and his fine staff if we do a poor job, we must acknowledge their continuing support. Equally important has been the great contribution from the New York-Metro RID. Mrs. Lynn Pamulo, President of New York-Metro, has attended every session and given generously of her time between meetings. Attendance at the Saturday morning sessions has not fallen below 18 persons and has gone as high as 31. Those attending have shared their experiences and their doubts, without consideration for themselves.

One final word. We plan to meet with representatives of other training institutions following the RID Convention, in August. At that time we hope to work out cooperative arrangements for the establishment of a continuing program for the preservice and inservice education of interpreters.