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# Communication Considerations and Relational Dialectical Tensions Experienced by University Sign Language Interpreters

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Rochester Institute of Technology

School of Communication

College of Liberal Arts

Communication Considerations and Relational Dialectical Tensions Experienced by University  
Sign Language Interpreters

by

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*A Thesis* submitted

in partial fulfillment of the Master of Science degree  
in Communication and Media Technologies

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COMMUNICATION CONSIDERATIONS AND RELATIONAL DIALECTICAL TENSIONS  
EXPERIENCED BY UNIVERSITY SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETERS

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Abstract

Sign language interpreter/student relationships are unique. Interpreters are present in the educational environment to facilitate communication between deaf/hard of hearing students and hearing professors and students; interpreters enable interlocutors to communicate effectively. In university environments it is not uncommon for interpreters and students to build relationships while they work together. However, professional codes and ethics for interpreters can conflict with the normal affinity developed in many interpersonal relationships. This can lead to contradictory tensions. Relational dialectics theory is guided by the premise that different forms of tension between people characterize interpersonal relationships. Opposing forces at play must be managed and negotiated for relationships to progress. This qualitative research uses semi-structured, in-depth interviews with university sign language interpreters to discover the type of relational dialectics they experience, as well as communication considerations used by interpreters to manage and negotiate relationships.

*Keywords:* interpreter, sign language, deaf, university, relational dialectics

Communication Considerations and Relational Dialectical Tensions  
Experienced by University Sign Language Interpreters

In a typical college classroom, you will find a multitude of different students. They come to the classroom with different cultures, different personalities, and different abilities. There are students who thrive in the classroom environment and some who struggle. Some students prefer lecture and some prefer experiential learning. Sometimes, you will find a student who is deaf or hard-of-hearing and uses American Sign Language (ASL) in the classroom. In those situations, you will often also find a sign language interpreter. Sign language interpreters add an interesting dynamic to a traditional classroom environment; the interpreter communicates concepts to the deaf student from the professor and the class from spoken language into a signed or manual language, and vice versa. The interpreter is not only communicating for the interlocutors, but as them. Interpreters adopt the speaker's tone, meaning, and intention, among other factors to relay the message to the other party. They portray each person's turn in the dialogue to achieve the goals of that person. Even when the interlocutors are working toward different ends, the interpreter is there, on both sides, as the animator of each's utterances.

In the university setting, many interpreters work in the same class with the same students and professor, often for more than one semester. This extended working relationship adds to the probability of social interaction between deaf students and the interpreter. These interactions can cause tension for interpreters who are not aware of how to navigate their unique place in the environment. This paper will outline previous research in the field of sign language interpreting as well as traditional classroom dynamics and the relational dialectics theory of communication. The present study will go on to discuss some main communication considerations of the sign language interpreter in a university environment as well as some dialectical tensions that may

arise from their position.

I have been an interpreter in the university environment for six years and in that time, have been challenged in multiple ways by the tensions that occur in the classroom. Originally, this study came about through anecdotal experience and conversations with colleagues. I felt that the more I worked with a deaf or hearing consumer (typically a deaf student and hearing professor) and the better I knew them, the better I was able to interpret for them. This experience goes both with and against what I was taught in my undergraduate program for interpreting. Interaction with the deaf community was encouraged, as it is a great way to grow skills in American Sign Language, become comfortable with the language and culture of deaf people, and become invested in the community with which interpreters are inextricably involved for the duration of their interpreting career. On the other hand, professionalism and adhering to a strictly impersonal role is stressed in many interpreting programs, sometimes causing tension.

Interpreters are supposed to socialize with deaf people, but are not supposed to be biased, instead maintaining professional neutrality when interpreting for them. As a college student and a new interpreter, these two approaches often came into conflict. In the first years of my interpreting career, especially when I was very close in age to the students for whom I was interpreting, friendship and socialization were common. As my career has matured, I have learned from those early experiences as I continue to deal with many tensions in my interpreting. While I have become more aware of my own place in the environment, I still am often presented with new challenges and tensions in managing relationships in the classroom.

The goal of this study was to explore the communication considerations as well as the dialectical tensions experienced by university interpreters. An added benefit was that the results have validated my own experience, and I hope they will validate the experience of others who

are struggling with the dialectical tensions of interpreting in this environment. In the following study, university interpreters were interviewed to call attention to the communication considerations and dialectical tensions they face every day.

## **Literature Review**

### **The Interpreter**

It is first important to understand the basics of sign language interpreting. The definition of interpretation is: “to expound, or explain.” Similarly, an interpreter is defined as: “an agent, go-between” (Wadensjo, 1998, p. 61). While working between two languages, sign language interpreters are also mediating the communication and, just by virtue of their presence, influencing the relationship of the primary parties. Interpreters have two central functions in their interpretations. The first is the actual language interpretation, going from the hearing party’s spoken language to the deaf person’s signed language, and vice versa. The second, and often times more subtle function of the interpreter is to coordinate and manage the conversational flow of the primary parties. There is a certain amount of control inherent by being the only person in the situation to understand everything that is being said (Wadensjo, 1998).

While striving to be unobtrusive, interpreters are active in the communication between hearing and deaf interlocutors. According to Cecelia Wadensjo in her book *Interpreting as Interaction* (1998), interpreters on duty understand themselves not only to be translating between two languages, but also performing various activities on the interlocutors’ behalf such as persuading, agreeing, lying, questioning, claiming, explaining, comforting, accusing, denying, coordinating interaction, and so forth. It is clear to interpreters that our work is based on much more than “say what they said,” and in the words of Jeremy Linn Brunson (2008), “This work is not solely a matter of choosing a sign for a word or even a phrase to convey a concept, but rather



one of negotiating relationships between people” ( p. 26). Interpreters can perform many functions aside from being a pure “middle-man;” they can become a communication “broker,” which affords an overview of and influence over the process and procedure of the interaction (Wadensjo, 1998).

The concept of a “non-person,” as described by Wadensjo (1998), classifies persons “who are present during an encounter, but in some respect do not take either the role of the performer or the audience, nor do they pretend to be what they are not” (p. 66). This idea is directly applicable to sign language interpreters. Interpreters, as individuals, are not considered part of the interaction, although they do have an effect. Interpreters, while vital, play a technical role in hearing-deaf communication and are not considered fully present members of the interaction. They are not expected to contribute to the conversation or interaction; this idea, however, is counter to what the interpreter actually does; the interpreter does speak publicly, and by that speech (or sign), regulates interaction and turn-taking of the interaction interlocutors (Wadensjo, 1998).

Llewellyn-Jones and Lee (2014) have explored the notion of role, which is an often discussed topic among interpreters. Many interpreters were taught that they are to be “invisible” while interpreting. To be invisible is to actively accept the label of “non-person.” These interpreters believe that they are never to initiate any of their own utterances, even to the extreme of refusing to introduce themselves to the non-signing party. Llewellyn-Jones and Lee, among others, offer that there is actually a range of appropriate behavior choices, depending on the situation and the interlocutors involved. In fact, they argue that interpreters should act in line with the social expectations of the environment, saying “Interpreters need to behave in ways that are consistent with, rather than counter to, expectations of participants. If interpreters act in ways

that are similar to other participants, interpreters can be more effective in facilitating communication” (Llewellyn-Jones & Lee, 2014, p. 31).

By its nature, sign language interpreting is fertile ground for tensions. While interpreters are considered non-persons in the interactions, they are present, as well as being present before and after the interpreted situation. Many interpreters were trained under the “conduit” or “machine” model of interpreting, meaning that the interpreter strives to be as invisible as possible in the assignment. While the logic behind this model makes sense, in a practical application, it is impossible. Thus, there are many tensions felt by interpreters who were trained to be invisible machines, but in fact are fallible humans with a range of opinions and emotions (Witter-Merithew, lecture, January 8, 2015). According to Anna Witter-Merithew (2015), “The interpreter’s role is socially constructed within human communication events. Interpreting involves human interlocutors; therefore, by its very nature, it is a relational activity” (lecture, January 8, 2015). The relationships involved can often cause internal conflict for interpreters.

Rapport building and interpersonal skills can be very beneficial to a sign language interpreter. Sign language interpreters must constantly be re-assessing and re-negotiating in the interpreted situation. Both the deaf and hearing interlocutors must be able to participate, the interpreter must be able to be seen and heard, and the interpreter must quickly ascertain relationships; in many situations, politics and power dynamics are an unspoken but vital part of an interaction (Janzen, 2005). Interpreters must be constantly aware of these factors and able to meet the needs that are presented in these dynamic environments. The interpreter must be able to understand these relationships, as well as their own relationship with the consumers and all parties in the environment.

It is also important to note that not all deaf people use language in the same way. There is

much linguistic variation in ASL and the deaf community. Interpreters must adjust their language accordingly, using features understandable and acceptable to the deaf person with whom they are working (Janzen, 2005). Interpreters need to be able to gauge the deaf person's language abilities and use to be able to interpret for them effectively. This is one reason to advocate for interaction with deaf consumers outside of the immediate interpreted interaction.

### **Classroom Interpreters**

The role of an interpreter in a university classroom is different than that of an interpreter who works in various "community" situations, in businesses, doctor's appointments, or community meetings, to name a few. The community interpreter often walks into unknown situations, the deaf person is not familiar to them, and the interpretation is a single instance. The interpreter comes in, interprets, and leaves, maybe never to see the interlocutors again. However, in the university classroom, the situation is often different. While the interpreter will be interpreting in various situations, such as lectures, labs, group meetings, or perhaps club activities, many times, it is the same interpreter for the entire semester. This means that there is a familiarity between the interlocutors and the interpreter (Janzen, 2005).

Interpreters in the classroom often feel tensions related to their status as a non-person. For example, people who try to eliminate all personal effects from their profession enjoy their work less, and feel frustrated, confused, angry, and unsatisfied in their workplace. Additionally, many interpreters are trained using a non-person model and thus begin their careers with a loss of self and an inability to find personal satisfaction in their line of work (Atwood & Gray, 1985). The interpreters who do not follow social norms and expectations can also be seen as cold or stand-offish, which can lead to further decrease in the enjoyment of interpreting and their job satisfaction.

In a university environment, there is often “down-time” in the classroom that allows for the interpreter to interact with other members of the class. When working with the same class for a semester of 16 weeks or longer, the interpreter does become a member of the classroom, and while perhaps a non-person during instructional time, there is opportunity, and often desire, to develop rapport with others in the environment.

When working in an on-going situation with students, who are often young and living independently for the first time, interpreters can become default helper figures in the college environment. However, Janzen (2005) advises caution when helping and advising deaf students.

Ironically, an interpreter’s well intentioned desire to help Deaf students can often lead to the greatest imbalance of power. Fostering dependency on the interpreter ultimately robs students of their right to make autonomous choices, to develop responsible decision-making skills, and to gain a sense of control over their own lives. It may also diminish the student’s self-confidence. (p. 285)

The university interpreter’s dual role is an important topic for consideration as it adds to the relational dynamics as well. The interpreter’s primary function is to relay a faithful message and facilitate communication successfully. Traditionally, interpreters have been thought of as a neutral and detached entity. However, if the interpreter is a staff member at a university, there is also an attachment and responsibility to that university’s goals and interests. This can cause tensions for interpreters who were trained to believe that they are required to be neutral and detached at all times (Witter-Merithew, lecture, January 8, 2015). Llewellyn-Jones and Lee (2014) agree and add, “Interpreters in education are part of the services they work for, and as such, have a vested interest in the minority language student they work for” (p. 55 ). Interpreters’ goals in these situations can go beyond just providing the appropriate signed or spoken message.

They may align with the professor's goals, such as being intentionally vague to encourage critical thinking, or in some cases making sure students are aware of what material will be on the test. Interpreters also align with the students by being aware of their goals for the class.

Sometimes those goals are just to pass the course, and sometimes they're to really delve into the topic. Being aware of and aligned with the goals of both (or all) interlocutors allow for the interpreter to make decisions based on those shared goals and for all parties to come away from the interaction feeling satisfied.

### **Classroom Dynamics**

**Non-interpreted classrooms.** In Amy Tsui's book (1995) *Classroom Interaction*, she defines the classroom as "...a place where more than two people gather together for the purpose of learning, with one having the role of teacher" (p. 1). Additionally, Tsui goes on to explain that interaction, including, but not limited to the classroom setting, must be managed by all participants. The teacher is not the only person who manages the interaction, because interaction is, by nature, something people do collectively. With this interaction come tensions. Tony Docan-Morgan (2001) asserts that good teacher-student relationships are beneficial in a learning environment because established rapport can influence interest, participation, and performance levels in students.

While positive interactions and good relationships are beneficial to both student and teacher, the institutional structure presents challenges in the form of a teacher's embedded power (Rawlins, 2000). Teachers are the ones who typically set the agenda for the course, keep the students on-task, and relate discussions to learning objectives. However, students also bring to the classroom environment their own experiences, moods, needs, goals, and so forth (Tsui, 1995). Therefore, everyone in the environment is adding to the dynamic, everyone is feeling

tensions, and everyone is managing those tensions in different ways.

In every classroom, there is pressure. By the hierarchical structure of the educational institution and by students' previous experiences, they are aware of the pressure to give the correct answer, to comply with appropriate social norms, to memorize and recite the correct information. For some students, this can be an intimidating situation (Tsui, 1995). Rawlins (2000) suggests that teaching in a way that encourages a friendly relationship with students is beneficial to all involved. There is a subtle, yet distinct difference in the use of the term friendly, instead of friend. To be friendly implies the liking of another, caring about them, and interacting politely. However, to be a friend requires a time commitment that many teachers cannot fulfill, nor should they be expected to. Teachers must be the ones to take on and communicate the friendly qualities and, in doing so, begin to counteract the deeply rooted hierarchy of the educational system (Rawlins, 2000). This pedagogical approach can be used by interpreters as well. Instead of using a completely detached model of interpreting, interpreters can utilize friendliness, or as discussed by Anna Witter-Merithew (lecture, January 8, 2015), a personable but not personal style, to achieve trust, rapport, and gain more mutual satisfaction in the interpreted classroom.

**The interpreted classroom.** It is vital, when thinking about interpreted classrooms, to consider the experiences of deaf and hard-of-hearing students in the university environment. According to Richardson, Marschark, Sarchet, and Sapere (2010), the majority of deaf students attending university institutions are in mainstream environments. However, studies have shown that deaf students may not understand as much as educators, interpreters, or they themselves, think they do. Deaf students in mainstreamed classrooms are also often at a disadvantage by coming into the classroom less prepared than their hearing counterparts (Convertino, Marschark,

Sapere, Sarchet, & Zupan, 2009). It is important to note, that as with hearing students, deaf students show a wide range of ability and aptitude, and should be treated as such, on an individual basis. With these experiences in mind, though, interpreters can alter their own practices to better serve the students with whom they work.

### **Relational Dialectics**

Relational dialectics theory is a popular communication theory that is directly applicable to university sign language interpreters. The theory of relational dialectics was born out of the broader study of dialectics in communication. Dialectics refers to competing forces perpetually working in opposition to one another. These forces could be intrapersonal, interpersonal, or come into play in group and societal situations. Relational dialectics focuses on interpersonal relationship communication (Baxter & Montgomery, 1998). Relational dialectics is the study of interplay between tensions that work in opposition and in collaboration with each other to dictate our communications. These dialectics have the ability to change our relationships.

This paper addresses the theory of relational dialectics applied in the classroom between deaf students and sign language interpreters in a university environment. According to Baxter and Montgomery (1998), communication is the basis for our personal relationships. Communication is an evolving, ever changing, and involved process that lets us, as interlocutors, understand ourselves, others around us, and our surroundings with more clarity. Communication is not just the words we say; communication in the sense of relational dialectics refers to all parts of communication, including facial expression, body language, unintended communication, or anything that gives the receiver clues to the meaning we're trying to convey. The authors say "the self exists only in relation with others, and communication constitutes that relationship"

(Baxter & Montgomery, 1998, p. 162).

One such relationship occurs between a deaf student and sign language interpreter in the classroom. This specific relationship has not been thoroughly studied using the relational dialectic approach. There has been study on relational dialectics in the classroom, but these are geared toward the traditional professor/student relationship. Many classrooms have other support staff involved. In classes with one or more deaf or hard-of-hearing student, one of these support staff persons may be a sign language interpreter.

### **Background of Relational Dialectics**

In his 1981 work, *The Dialogic Imagination*, Russian philosopher and author Mikhail Bakhtin critiqued communication theories that labeled society as a monologic, or “either/or” system. Bakhtin (1981) argued that instead, all social life and society is an open “dialogue” that is constantly changing and evolving based on what has happened in that past and what is happening in the present. Society is not closed or one-way; all decisions and actions have rippling effects immediately and in the future (West & Turner, p. 202). Through Bakhtin’s dialogic perspective, each person’s identity is self-realized, but also a reflection of ourselves as seen through others. These two “selves” can be contradictory in their roles and perceptions. It is also of note that Bakhtin asserted that all dialogues are not monologic because they must be woven together based on content and interest, but, at the same time, approached with at least two different viewpoints and opinions. The dialogical perspective is the simultaneous emphasis on similarity and difference (1981, p. 359). This was the foundation on which Bakhtin based his concept of dialogics. Dialogics is a vital part of the relational dialectics theory that asserts we as humans use all dialogues of the past to shape the dialogues of the future (Baxter & Montgomery, 1998).



The broad theory of dialectics holds that there are always contradictions in our life, forces that are pushing and pulling us to respond and communicate one way or another. These dialecticals are often thought to be like two poles, or two ends of a spectrum. They are inherent opposites, and individuals often feel impelled toward both at the same time. However, the poles are not monologic, or mutually exclusive. What actually occurs is a spectrum between and extending beyond the poles. Dialectics is not necessarily looking for a balance or “happy medium” when it comes to the dialectical forces. While this may seem a bit messy or imprecise, scholars of relational dialectics theory hold that, in essence, such is life. Why would communication and relationships be any less messy (West & Turner, 2010)? We would be hard pressed to find a person who did not feel conflicted at some point between different desires and needs within their relationships. These conflicts are the core of relational dialectics.

### **Traditional Dialectics**

Dialectical scholarship is based on four main concepts. They are contradiction, change, praxis, and totality (Baxter & Montgomery, 1998). This study focuses on contradiction. Contradiction refers to the interaction between opposite forces that are brought together by their common occurrence in communication. They are simultaneously interdependent on each other but mutually negate each other either by their definition, by their function, or by logic (Baxter & Montgomery, 1998). For example, contradictions could be felt when a person wants to keep hurtful information from their partner, but feels compelled to tell them. The contradictions in relationships are the catalyst for change.

The second core concept of dialectics is change. In this theory, change comes in many forms, as motion or process. Because of the constant contradictions that individuals in relationships are faced with, change is inevitable. We must continue to adapt to the dialectical

tensions that surround us, causing flux and fluidity in our relationships (Baxter & Montgomery, 1998). Consider the previous example of the hurtful information being shared. If the previously mentioned partner shares the information, that can cause a shift in the relationship and the dialectical tensions therein.

The third foundation is praxis. Praxis, or intertextuality (Rawlins, 2000) refers to the connectedness of every past dialogue to affect the present and all future dialogues (Baxter & Montgomery, 1998). West and Turner (2010) described the idea of praxis by illustrating that we, as humans, are choice makers. We cannot control the choices made by others, nor do we have free choice in all situations. In general, the choices we make will effect and ultimately direct future choices. If the hurtful information is shared, that will affect the choice both partners make in handling their dialectical tensions. And all choices made previously impacted the decision to share the hurtful information.

Finally, the concept of totality is vital to the field of dialectics. Totality refers to the inseparability of contradictions as well as insuperability of the contradictions affecting all parties in the relationship (Baxter & Montgomery, 1998; West & Turner, 2010). Baxter and Montgomery state that

...one contradiction cannot be considered in isolation of other contradictions with which it is integrally linked. A second sense of totality is the contextual embeddedness of the dialectical experience, contradiction cannot be separated from its temporal, spatial, and sociocultural settings . (1998, p. 11)

Baxter and Montgomery go so far as to call this a “knot of contradictions,” whereby there are more various contradictions working against each other, interlinked and interdependent centripetal (dominant) and centrifugal (countering) forces (1998, p. 157).

These centripetal and centrifugal forces are one way that Baxter and Montgomery (1998), the leading researchers of relational dialectics, differentiate their study from traditional dialectics study. They propose that the idea of two opposite poles is an inaccurate representation of the intricacy of relationships. Instead, they say, relationships are better thought of as much more complex and convoluted centripetal or dominant forces and centrifugal, or countering forces. One dominant centripetal force could be countered by a variety of centrifugal forces at work. For example, instead of the traditional dialectic approach of a certainty-unpredictability contradiction, relational dialectic scholars argue that there could be many centrifugal forces opposing the centripetal force of “certainty” such as certainty-novelty, certainty-mystery, and certainty-excitement, to name a few (1998, p. 157). This concept is what makes relational dialectics a novel theory; gone is the notion of dialectics moving between two poles, but instead in a messy knot of contradiction, change, praxis, and totality.

All humans in all relationships experience dialectical tensions, and we must manage them in some way. VanLear (1998) outlines four main responses to control dialectical tensions in interpersonal relationships. They are redefinition, balancing, contingent selection, and cyclical alteration. When a person uses redefinition as a strategy to diffuse dialectical tensions, they are really framing one side of the dialectic so that it no longer seems to contradict with the other. For example, if someone is not completely honest, they could redefine their evasive statements as “tactful,” or “discrete.” Redefinition is an effective strategy when the individual wants to justify their contradictory behaviors (VanLear, 1998, p. 125).

Balancing is a response that avoids extreme reactions to either pole of the dialectic. This moderate approach may seem ideal and useful in many situations, however, it is not always possible to be perfectly neutral in our daily lives; as humans our feelings and desires can cancel

out the effort to stay moderate (VanLear, 1998).

A third way of coping with dialectical contradictions is contingent selection. This principle involves choosing one force or contradiction of the dialectic depending on the situation. The conditions of the environment dictate which force is chosen, and the same person can choose different forces of the dialectic according to different scenarios. According to VanLear (1998), “There are numberless possible situational contingencies, but the nature of the relationship, its relational history, the episode being enacted, and the behavior of one’s relational partner seem to be important” (p. 125). The choices we make to ease our feelings of tension depend on the relationship, the timing, and the specific conditions of that one interaction.

The last way an individual can respond to dialectical tensions is by using cyclical altering; alternating behaviors between two tensions of a dialectical pair in a timed pattern. This response differs from contingent selection because instead of depending on the situation, cyclical altering is based on time and there is a regular pace and rhythm to the pattern (VanLear, 1998, p. 126). Because of the tensions at play and the participants’ desires to quell those tensions, relationships are in a constant state of flux. According to Prentice and Kramer (2006), no relationship can reach stasis because the interlocutors are always coping with the dialectical tensions at play.

### **Relational Dialectical Pairs**

It is helpful to outline some formative relational dialectics, so the reader can understand how they are simultaneously separate and inextricably linked. There are some classically studied dialectics that are still used, in addition to others, in the relational dialectics field. There are three relational dialectics that guide the majority of relational dialectics work. The first is the autonomy-connection dialectic; while we want to keep our individuality and identity, we seek

bonds with those around us. This dialectic is prominent in romantic relationships, friendships, and workplace relationships. Second, there is the openness-protection dialect. We want to be open with people, but at the same time we desire privacy and do not want to become vulnerable by sharing too much. The last of the classic dialectics is novelty-predictability. We all need some change in our lives; we like to experience new things. However, we feel the need to have some stability and routine as well to help us feel safe and grounded (West & Turner, 2010).

The previously outlined dialectics are the starting point for all later dialectical research. However, the context of the relationship and interaction can lead to other, more nuanced dialectics. Some of the dialectics found in classrooms and with minority group students are specifically appropriate to help clarify the environment in which this study is based.

### **Classroom Dialectics**

As discussed previously, Rawlins (2000) asserts that teaching as a form of friendship is effective and introduces a dialectic of affection-instrumentality. He says that teachers should behave in a friendly and respectful way toward their students, fostering a situation of trust and reciprocity. However, the professor must also let the students retain their freedom of choice in deciding to participate in the reciprocal “friendship.” While this approach emphasizes positive and caring interactions between student and teacher, as well as the class collectively, there is an inherent institutional and structural inequality that places the teacher in a position of power and superiority while also placing the onus on them to appropriately facilitate the class. Equality between teachers and students in the classroom can be hindered by numerous factors, such as the structural challenges embedded in the educational system and the power that is automatic in the professional position of a teacher. As Rawlins states,

It is simply a good practice to enlarge the circle of caring in today’s violent and distracted

world; it is also a worthy practice to try to make students feel good about themselves. We are in their trust....This approach involves developing a caring relationship with students, searching for means and moments of speaking as equals, and encouraging shared responsibility for learning together. Educational friendship emphasizes positive and edifying communicative stances and relationships of teachers with individual students and toward classes as collectives. Even given this relationship, teachers and students face ongoing challenges in managing dialectical tensions, which make the sustained achievement of educational friendships a risky and fragile behavior. (2000, p. 10)

It is possible to treat students in a friendly way; we can be caring, polite, and compassionate. As professionals, teachers (and interpreters?) can do this without the time commitment and possible relational tensions that come with true friendship.

Another related dialectic at play in the classroom is freedom to be independent vs. freedom to be dependent (Rawlins, 2000). This plays out in situations such as students wanting to learn and grow on their own but simultaneously looking to the professor to communicate and be available when needed. The teacher must also give guidance and direction, without restricting the choices of the student. This is quite germane to the classroom with a deaf student and an interpreter because there is a need for the interpreter, but also a need for the deaf student to function and develop independently. According to Brenda Chafin Seal (1998), it is important for deaf college students to exhibit two main characteristics, diversity and individualism. This can affect the student/interpreter relationship because the student wants and needs to be an individual; they are at a time in their life when it is vital to forge their own way and become independent. However, they often must rely on the interpreter in the classroom. Interpreters have inherent power in their positions; power to control access to communication, power to

dictate scheduling, as well as power embedded in their professional status. It is important for interpreters to take the time and recognize opportunities to treat deaf students as equals and empathize with their needs for independence and individualism (Rawlins, 2000).

### **Deaf Students in Classrooms**

Professors may have no experience working with sign language users and interpreters in their classrooms. There are specific relational dialectics in play during intercultural interactions that may occur when a deaf student, who identifies with the minority culture related to deafness and sign language, enters a mainstream environment. Dialectics that any cultural minority, including deaf students, may feel when interacting in situations with the majority group include integration-segregation, stability-change, and expression-privacy (Simmons, Lowery-Hart, Wahl, & McBride, 2013).

In integration-segregation, the deaf student may want to “fit in” and be part of the hearing class, but at the same time feel a need to express his or her identity as a member of the Deaf culture. This is a common dialectic felt when minority groups are interacting with the majority culture. Members of the minority culture, Deaf culture in this case, recognize the need to assimilate to the majority and “play by their rules.” However, Deaf students who identify with the minority culture still want to be seen as a separate entity and function with cultural autonomy (Simmons et al., 2013).

In stability-change, as humans we revert to what we know, as well as craving new and exciting opportunities. A deaf student in a mainstream environment may struggle to balance learning the norms of mainstream culture with feeling comfortable with what they know. While many sign language users have been in mainstream environments before, the transition from working with interpreters in the primary and secondary schools to postsecondary schools can be

challenging (Chafin Seal, 1998).

Finally, expression-privacy is an important intercultural dialectic. There is a struggle to decide what about the minority culture one is willing to disclose for the sake of commonality and rapport, while still valuing and cherishing some things as private. Specifically for Deaf culture, as a “high context” community, sharing information is highly valued and seen as a cornerstone of the interaction and rapport (Brunson, 2008). This can sometimes cause discord with hearing teachers and peers who can seem much more private and cold. It also lends to the benefit of interpreters employing friendship in their relationships with deaf students.

Many deaf and hard of hearing college students have worked with interpreters before in a mainstreamed educational environment and feel comfortable with the function and process of interpreters and other access personnel; however, many professors have not and this can cause tensions for all parties involved (Chafin Seal, 1998).

### **Importance**

This study will shed light on feelings and a topic that university sign language interpreters often face and discuss anecdotally, but do not necessarily have the vocabulary for or understanding of on a more conceptual level. It is the hope of this study to provide a framework for discussion and encourage development of strategies for handling the dialectical tensions that are unavoidable in the everyday work of interpreters. It is important for the interpreters to be able to express themselves and their own experiences, stories that are missing from the research to this point.

Additionally, in the interpreting field, there is a commonly referenced phenomenon known as the school to work gap (Witter-Merithew, lecture, January 8, 2015). Students are taught in a classroom setting and prepared for a select number of situations, but it is an



impossibility to be prepared for every situation a new interpreter could face, simply because of the dynamic nature of sign language interpreting. In addition, many interpreters work in isolation; most areas of the United States do not have large communities of deaf people or many interpreters. It is challenging for novice interpreters to evaluate their own work and gauge their ethical decision making (Witter-Merithew, lecture, January 8, 2015). This study could give a guide to common challenges university interpreters face, and thereby, the novice interpreter will be able to contemplate and prepare their own strategies for navigating the communication considerations and dialectical tensions they will inevitably face.

### **Research Questions**

Because there has been study before on the dialectics at play in a traditional setting, it seems that nontraditional classroom situations are also important to look into. In our modern university educational system, there are various support staff who are integral to the success of students. One such instance is when there is a deaf student who uses a sign language interpreter. Using what has been learned about relational dialectics and their impact on the classroom, the study addressed the following questions:

**RQ 1:** What communication considerations are common to the sign language interpreter's perception of their interaction in the university classroom?

**RQ 2:** What dialectic tensions occur with sign language interpreters in the college classroom?

### **Methods**

The purpose of this study was to begin to understand the communication considerations and dialectic tensions faced by sign language interpreters in a university setting. This section will outline the process of information collecting and synthesize the results.

**Participants**

After being approved by the University's Human Subject Research Office, participants were recruited by email from the Rochester Institute of Technology's (RIT) Department of Access Services. RIT houses the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID) and employs over 100 sign language interpreters on staff. The participants who received the email self-selected and volunteered for a one hour interview with the researcher. The first eight respondents were chosen (see Table 1). All participants in the study work as staff sign language interpreters. While choosing the first respondents was a clear way to select those to be interviewed, the demographics of those eight are not necessarily representative of the university interpreting community. The median university interpreting experience was 21.5 years, and the female: male ratio was 5:3. In terms of the demographics of staff interpreters at RIT, this sample is not necessarily representative of the population who in actuality, has interpreters ranging in experience and is also an overwhelmingly female staff.

Table 1

*Participant Demographics*

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Pseudonym	Gender	Interpreting Experience	Post-Secondary Experience
Will	Male	36	30
Lydia	Female	17	16
Barb	Female	15	15
Britt	Male	27	27
Ann	Female	28	12
Andrew	Male	3	2.5
Becky	Female	33	33
Corey	Female	38	38

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## **Approach**

This study used semi-structured interviews as the information collection method. The participants were asked a specific set of questions, but their answers were organic and often anecdotal. Each participant was provided with an informed consent document, giving them information about any possible risk factors associated with the study and contact information for the researcher and RIT's Human Subjects Research Office. Face-to-face interviews were conducted at various times and locations as determined by the researcher and the participants' schedules. All interviews were conducted in private rooms and offices within the Department of Access Services at RIT.

Some scholars suggest using a focus group for this kind of study (Kvale, 2006); however, this researcher chose to use individual interviews for a variety of reasons. First, all participants in the study are employed in the same department of the same university. Candid discussion and anonymity were paramount in this study, so individual interviews assured that the participants would be able to express themselves fully, without fear of judgment or retribution from other participants. Additionally, while group discussion can encourage differing perspectives, the researcher thought it was important to let each participant be heard in full. The researcher was able to ask individual follow-up questions and understand each participant's experience in more detail than might have been possible in a larger discussion.

Individual interviewing was appropriate and beneficial to this study; however, criticism could come from some for the limited number of participants. By diving deeply into the stories of eight university interpreters, this study is not meant to paint all interpreters with a broad brush or in generalities. It is the hope of this researcher that the comments and themes from the participants will resonate in some ways with other interpreters, and strategies learned can be

transferred to their individual situations and approaches.

Additionally, it should be noted that the researcher is also a full-time staff sign language interpreter at RIT. This participant-observer role can be considered both a benefit and a hindrance. It is a benefit because of the candor a peer interviewer can elicit. However, the researcher's own experiences may affect the questions asked and the interpretations of their responses. Ultimately, the collegial understanding afforded by interviewing those with whom the researcher was already familiar is, in this case, considered a benefit to the study.

Each interview began with a short explanation of the goal of the study, an opportunity to read the informed consent document, and a guarantee of anonymity. Next, the interlocutors were made aware that the interview would be video recorded, but the participant themselves would not be visible on the video; it would only be their voice. The interview portion began with two demographic questions, and then participants were asked specific questions to help answer the previously mentioned research questions:

RQ 1: What communication considerations are common to the sign language interpreter's perception of their interaction in the university classroom?

RQ 2: What dialectic tensions are faced by signed language interpreters in the university classroom?

There were nine standard questions asked in each interview (see appendix A), and follow-up questions were asked at the researcher's discretion, per guidelines for semi-structured interviews. Interviews ranged in time, but were all concluded in less than one hour. In addition to the recording of the interviews, the researcher took notes during and immediately after the interviews. Approximately eight pages of single-spaced, hand-written notes were recorded.

## Data Analysis

The data was analyzed using a thematic approach. Thematic analysis consists of finding common important themes to explain the phenomenon (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Thematic analysis lets the researcher search for, identify, organize, and report patterns or themes (Braun & Clark, 2006). The researcher studied each interview multiple times, and took extensive notes on which ideas became salient and were repeated and emphasized by multiple participants. These ideas then became categories (communication considerations and dialectical tensions) which were used to group the participants' responses. The approach was inductive; the categories were developed as they came to light, instead of forcing responses into pre-made categories. The approach was modeled after Hennings' 2009 master's thesis on relational dialectics of graduate teaching assistants. It is the hope of the researcher that these insights will further the understanding of the communication considerations and relational dialectics that university sign language interpreters face.

## Results

This study sought to shed light on the communication considerations and dialectical tensions that are present in the university educational environment between sign language interpreters and students with whom they work. Questions were asked about when, why, and what interpreters choose to share with deaf students as well as what their typical interactions look like with students as well as faculty.

RQ 1: What communication considerations are common to the sign language interpreter's perception of their interaction in the university classroom?

## Communication Considerations

**Communication consideration one: Personable, not personal.** All participants

mentioned the importance of building rapport and a friendly relationship with the deaf students they are interpreting for. This is done not only to enhance the enjoyability of the workplace, but building trust and rapport can arguably help the interpretation. The interpreters were very specific in their comments about how they interact with deaf students in the classroom environment. Overwhelmingly, the interpreters favor a warm and personable relationship with the students with whom they work. These personable relationships serve multiple functions as well: they make the classroom experience more enjoyable for both parties, they increase the trust that is vital in an interpreted situation, and they also allow the interpreter a window into the deaf student's language use. These benefits can become cyclical. If the interpreter sees the student's language use and interprets in a style that is readily understandable to that student, the trust between the two can increase, thus even more increasing the enjoyability of the interaction for both parties. While the interpreters are happy to have a friendly interaction with the students, they were clear that there is a professional boundary that does not often cross into the social realm. For many, this was attributed to the age difference between many interpreters and the students for whom they interpret, who are often in their late teens or early twenties. As the age difference between the interpreters and students increased, it seems that the temptation and opportunity for social interaction decreases. Additional specific comments about interpreters' typical relationships with deaf students are included in Table 2.

Table 2

*Interpreters' Typical Relationships with Deaf Students*

Participant	Response
Will	<p data-bbox="404 457 1248 520">“A little humor and friendship there...friendship is the wrong word. Acquaintanceship”.</p> <p data-bbox="404 558 1377 657">“I try to be friendly and personable but not personal. I loved that when I first heard it and I thought ‘this is the way I'm going to be’. And that’s what guides me”.</p> <p data-bbox="404 695 1256 758">“I will, ya know, be friendly, tell a joke before class, you know, just something general. It’s not like I go to their birthday party”.</p>
Corey	<p data-bbox="404 846 1386 978">“The student, I do want to ally with them, because they’re always the odd man out. And if anything, I don’t want them to feel odd man out. I want them to feel that they’ve got equal standing in the class, and call me an ally, yes, but they just don’t feel alone.”</p> <p data-bbox="404 1016 1305 1108">“I think that [the relationship] was satisfactory enough of a warm.. see I wouldn’t characterize it as friendship, but a warm relationship as an interpreter and as a student.”</p> <p data-bbox="404 1146 1369 1209">“I try to be warm to set up, you know, ‘this is going to be good, we’re going to do a good job together’.</p>
Lydia	<p data-bbox="404 1272 1360 1404">“Mostly it’s just friendly in class, I try to chat with them a little bit, I try to make it light and humorous. I like them to feel like I'm approachable, so that if there is something that they don’t like or if they want to correct a sign or something that they feel they can do that.”</p> <p data-bbox="404 1442 1398 1472">“We were very friendly outside of class but we didn’t, like, go out or anything”</p>
Barb	<p data-bbox="404 1541 1369 1701">“I'm much more of a person that tried to be personable than personal. So I don’t have social relationships with the students that I work with. There are some I keep in touch with, that I don’t interpret for them anymore, I like to see where they’re going and just to kind of keep in touch but no, I'm not going out... with the students, I just don’t.’</p>



- Ann
- “I would call it a connecting professional. Connecting is important to me, if that’s available.”
- “I am comfortable making myself available for them, for us. Because really, it’s an us thing. If we connect, there’s more of a chance, from my perspective that this will work...but on the other hand, if what I do closes this person down, that’s not helpful.”
- “I’m real aware when they’re starting and real aware that it’s physics and I want to be on it, and I know she wants to be on it and so I’m really good at...holding space that still feels professional but keeps the humanistic quality.”
- Andrew
- “Typically I would say it’s positive, collegial in the sense that we’re obviously not co-workers but we are a team”
- “There are students who, when I see, I’ll say hi to. There’s one student who gave me a hug when she saw me a couple of weeks ago for the beginning of the semester. But um, friends? I mean, I’m twice their age so... So it’s not like I’m going out and hanging out with these people in the club and bars and stuff like that.”
- Becky
- “Sometimes you really dig the student and something about them just pulls at you and some, they have a wall and aren’t friendly or whatever but generally I get along really well with students.”
- “Sometimes I start off by self-disclosing something. As an opener to the fact that I’m open to just kind of like...and that way I do it not to be their buddy but also if they ever want to tell me I like your style or I need something changed or whatever, then they know I’m approachable. It kind of opens up the lines of communication that way”
-

Clearly, the personable versus personal theme was important to the interpreters. They are looking to connect or, as discussed by of Llewellyn-Jones and Lee (2014) exhibit a higher presentation of self, in order to build rapport and trust with the deaf students. This presentation of self is dependent on the situation and social cues that are gauged by the interpreter. Many times these cues are gleaned from observing and reacting to the behavior of the students.

**Communication consideration two: Taking cues from students.** Another prevalent theme in the interviews was that many interpreters took their cues on friendly behavior and rapport from the students. If the students are willing to be friendly and chat, the interpreters were happy to reciprocate. If the students were less interested in interacting with the interpreter, typically, the interpreter would not initiate more conversation and only engage when the student was the initiator. The interpreters are interested in the benefits of good rapport, but also recognize the importance of not being pushy with students. Interpreters are in the environment and can be expected to behave as any professional would. That can mean polite and friendly, but careful not to be too insistent in their desire to build a relationship with the student.

The interpreters are striving to make the deaf students an equal part of the classroom environment, and for some that means that the students have the option of not engaging with the interpreter at all, much like hearing students may not engage the professor in conversation that is outside the course content. While the interpreters in this study were happy to open the door for friendly conversation, they were quick to mention that this conversation only continues if and when it was actively engaged in by the student (see Table 3).

Table 3

*Engagement in Non-Academic Conversation*

Participant	Response
Will	“It definitely depends on the students, there are some students that I barely engage with at all. I mean I might say ‘Hi, what’s your name?’ or whatever the first day of the quarter and then based on the feedback I get back from them, the visual feedback usually, the ‘I don’t wanna talk to you’, then I’m like OK.”
Barb	“I tend to take my lead from them. Because some deaf students don’t want to chat with you and don’t want to socialize with you but I can tell there’s some deaf students that it’s very important to them that once in a while they hug me, and that’s ok, it’s ok...That’s a bit of a struggle for me but, it’s ok, hug me, that’s a good sign.”
Britt	“Depending on the type of openness that they have, the more open they are, the more open I will be but I let them take the impetus.”  “This is not different from my interaction with any other person on the face of the earth. Really, It’s exactly the same, you know? If I feel that they are friendly and funny and open and, you know, they make jokes, then I can match that and I can have fun with that. If they’re withdrawn and shy and don’t want to talk, well, ok, we’ll just stare at one another, or our phones.”
Ann	“I’m reserved, I’m an introvert...that doesn’t mean I’m [shy] that means I will wait for the right cues. If someone’s like, on their phone and totally doing something, I’m not going to go [uses sign language cues to get attention]. Some people will and that’s just who they are but I’ll just wait till they look up.”
Andrew	“A lot of times, it’s how they respond. If I try to engage in conversation and they’re responsive and they join the conversation then that continues, or seems to continue throughout the time that I’m working with them. If I try to engage them in conversation and there’s no response or very little response... It’s just, whether it’s a hearing person or a deaf person...if I get cold response then I try to continue to ask maybe, very non-intrusive questions but just like ‘how are you doing?’. Whether it’s deaf or hearing I think it’s those topics of ‘how’s the weather’...You know, very safe.”

When students are happy to engage in conversation, interpreters are happy to reciprocate. Typically the conversations are light and pleasant, much as you would expect with any other professional acquaintance. However, sometimes students, especially living on their own for the first time can need more assistance than the interpreter is able or willing to give.

**Communication consideration three: Be a resource person for college students.** As an “adult” in the university environment, there are often instances where students will ask interpreters for help or advice. These requests can come in a variety of topics, including class and professor concerns, access and language issues, homework help, personal issues, as well as other life related topics. Sometimes, the interpreters may notice something seems “off” with the student and become concerned about the student’s wellbeing. The prevailing response by study participants in this situation is to be a resource person, but to rarely provide the help or advice directly. Interpreters are cognizant of their loyalties to both the student as well as the university. The university has goals of student health and happiness, and at times, those goals can supersede some interpreters’ desire to be unobtrusive or impartial in the environment.

Interpreters also have a unique position as, often, the only person in the room able to understand the entirety of the situation. The deaf student may be cut off linguistically from the professor and the hearing students in the class, and the hearing people in the class may be equally as cut off from the deaf student and their culture. Some interpreters feel it is acceptable and necessary to assist the deaf student in navigating not only the university environment, but also a culture with which they may not be comfortable (see Table 4).

Table 4

*Interpreter as a Resource Person for College Students*

Participant	Response
Corey	<p data-bbox="391 470 1422 737">“I let them take the lead, for the most part... If they look uncertain about something or they’re trying to, you know, find that place in that class or maybe if they’re the only [deaf] student, then that makes it hard. I try to give them indicators of how to navigate the room, or the teacher, or this course, or in the building, or those kinds of things so I can give them a leg up. So that they can kind of develop their confidence and then they can move forward. Then they kind of trust me, ’cause they know that I am giving them their own wings but helping them find that footing.”</p> <p data-bbox="391 772 1422 972">“I’m just trying to help them navigate. Not spoon feeding them, not pouring it down their throat..... I’m very big on “incidental learning”, everything that goes on, that they’re too, or maybe they know that something’s going on but... We as hearing people want to know that. We maybe just heard that there’s a sale on shoes or whatever or “don’t take that professor” or... you know, they’ve got to GET all of that. And they don’t even know that they haven’t gotten it.”</p> <p data-bbox="391 1008 1422 1272">“I like to say I was a ‘fine ambassador’ of RIT. And I think, I’m not using my position as an interpreter. I like to think that I’m a good resource and I like to think that I’m a good adult representative of the institute... You’re just an adult and you might have something that is helpful and I think anybody in life would do that with someone that they have some kind of shared space with, so I really don’t think that I’ve ever abused the privilege I have to have a connection with people. But I should hope that everyone in the world would want to share insights.”</p>
Lydia	<p data-bbox="391 1335 1422 1472">“If it were something really serious, I would probably stop them right away and be like ‘listen, this sounds like it’s really serious and I think you need to speak to somebody who really is trained to help you with this or has the resources to help you with this.”</p>
Barb	<p data-bbox="391 1556 1422 1755">“I’ve interpreted classes repeatedly sometimes and there are things I know about the professor that I might share with the deaf student, or things I know about the course from having done it before that I might share with the deaf student. And again, I’m really careful about that too, because I don’t want to influence somebody...What do I know about life that might be helpful and what do I know about life that would be helpful to keep to myself.”</p> <p data-bbox="391 1791 1422 1885">“It depends on the specific problem or question but a lot of times it’s just finding the right people that they need to go talk to and just letting them know. And being willing to go walk them there sometimes...And I do a lot</p>

of hoping, or trying to get people to advocate for themselves...So I've done coaching to try to get people to be emboldened to take care of what they need... but how much can you do for people who are, just for whatever reason, saying 'oh, yeah I'll just put up with it'."

Ann "I'm part of this campus and I have told people 'do you have a friend you could talk to afterward?' or about the center we have. But not like 'oh I think you need to go'."

"It's not my job to solve it, but I give them avenues."

"If it seems really serious, offering, if I can interpret even, 'we can go here and I'll interpret'."

Andrew "I will do things such as, if I realize a student is struggling with a particular topic, I will advise them to go to the tutor. I will advise them that 'look, do you know there are deaf tutors or tutors that work with deaf students?'"

Becky "If I see a student who seems like they're in emotional trouble or it seems like something's really seems wrong, I might just say 'are you ok?' Because I also see myself as part of the academic community and also an adult. And they're students and they're young and if I see something that seems amiss and there's anything I could direct them toward services. And I kind of see that as one of our jobs too, not to get in their face but just like 'are you ok? Is there some help that you need and can I help you find it?'"

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The interpreters in this study were not hesitant to mention their willingness to help students find the resources that they need. From this sample, specifically, the participants have a wealth of life experience as well as a considerable amount of knowledge of the university environment. This truly makes them perfect ambassadors of the university, and their dual role has no real need to be contradictory. It is also important for the interpreters to know when their assistance and help is beneficial and when it is more beneficial to perform their interpreter role.

**Communication consideration four: Separate “social time” and “work time.”** When a student and an interpreter work together often, sometimes weekly or more for up to four years, they get to know each other. However, it is important for interpreters to be able to separate their interpreting work from their friendship with the student. When interviewing about this, many interpreters mentioned that they are happy to keep in touch with some students after graduation. Others are able to maintain professionalism in the classroom and a friendship outside of the classroom by making sure everyone is aware that while in the academic setting, the academic interpreting is the priority and the friendship can resume when the work is done. Some interpreters also mentioned using the instructional time as a way to divert attention away from personal conversations with which they were not comfortable. Some interpreters mentioned times (earlier in their career) when the professional boundaries were not as easily kept clear. However, it was the understanding of those involved that when there was interpreting to be done, the interpreter was there in the professional capacity and the social life did not integrate into the classroom (see Table 5).

Table 5

*Separation of “Social” and “Work” Time*

Participant	Response
Lydia	“If we were in a classroom I might try to steer [the conversation] to the content, like ‘oh the teacher looks like she’s about ready to get started now’ or ‘you won’t believe what these guys are talking about over here’”
Barb	<p>“If instruction has not yet started then I am [comfortable engaging]. If we’re not in active learning class time, then sure. And it depends on the amount. What would make me uncomfortable, I guess, is if anyone was being disrespected, like a professor, that makes me very uncomfortable, if they have the floor.”</p> <p>“If I can do my job effectively and I’m not compromised in any way by the relationship then sure, I don’t care if they come over to my house...I just tend to not as a rule, but I don’t have a rule against it either...For some students I think that would be too much and I’m not here to be your best bud.”</p>
Britt	<p>“If it’s in the assignment, I have to know, or perceive, that they know what is going on, that they are caught up, that they have no questions, that they’re down with this stuff, AND there has to be a reasonable amount of downtime where the professor has yet to get the computer out of his bag, before he has to hook it up so I know that there’s going to be time to sit and stare at one another or do something else”</p> <p>“Being an interpreter, we’re never in one place or another, we kind of bridge the two. And so by spanning those two I can. Depending on the deaf student. Ok now the deaf student is the outgoing one that wants to tell me things and ask me questions and I’ll answer the questions like a colleague. And yet, when the class is in session, now I’m the teacher and I’m not going to be doing that interaction with you until there is some type of [break]...”</p>
Ann	“I don’t feel uncomfortable putting a stop to something and I also feel that...I’ve got enough tools to know when it’s not going well...And it’s very easy for me to connect back to the message. And be sensitive and still be able to say ‘hey, how are you doing?’ and close the door a little.”
Becky	“I’ve done that [seen students socially] when I’ve felt that it’s not in danger of jeopardizing the work, and I didn’t do it while I was interpreting for their class. They were still students, but if they were my friend it wasn’t while I was actively interpreting for them.”



Interpreters are actively able to separate the social aspect from the interpreting aspect of their time in the classroom. Additionally, interpreters are focused on the active learning time, and can even use that as a way to discontinue a conversation with which they are not comfortable.

**Communication consideration five: Interpreter-professor dynamic.** Another important relationship in the interpreted university classroom is that between the interpreter and the professor. Participants in this study mentioned numerous approaches and considerations involved when managing relationships with professors. Some of these come with age and experience, a few participants mentioned being allied with the professor more than the students because they are typically closer in age to the professors. They are also possibly closer in career trajectory, and can connect with the professor on a professional level. And as with the deaf students, it is important to develop a rapport and trust with the professor in order to accurately interpret for them and communicate their goals effectively (see Table 6).

Table 6

*Managing Relationships with Professors*

Participant	Response
Corey	I want to build a relationship with the professor because for a lot of the class, we are them. We are their face, we are their voice. Visual voice, or whatever. So you have to, really, get a little bit under their skin or in their head, so that you truly can become a comparable version of them.”
Lydia	“There are other times when the student is either not into class or not engaged but I know the professor and they’re like, super into having the deaf students succeed and they want the success and the deaf student really doesn’t want anything to do with it and they’re apathetic. I feel more closely allied to the teacher cause you know, I’m in a university and I’m here to interpret for both of you so I kind of feel more allied to whoever it is, I don’t want to say more friendly or congenial, but, more invested in what’s going on.”
Barb	“I’m responsible for responding to the entire communication situation. So I need to be aware of how much the professor is sensitive to the fact that there is a whole conversation happening here in sign language and they’re not involved. And the longer I’ve been in this job the more I realize that professors are sensitive to the fact that there’s a signing corner of the room and they’re not included in that. And they’re missing out on a lot of information about their students and lot of information about how much are they paying attention, how much do they understand? I’ve noticed that the teachers are feeling that and they don’t know how to approach it so they usually don’t. And instead of taking their silence as they don’t care, I’m noticing more and more that maybe they just don’t know how to engage with that whole signing part of the room that’s ignoring them and everyone else.”
Britt	“I make it a point to align myself with the professor. Regardless of who the deaf student/s are. If there was anything I thought was going on out there in the classroom that might impact what was going on with my job, I would let the professor know, ASAP”
Andrew	“I see myself as an interpreter between these two entities, we have the deaf students, hearing professor, most of the time. So I am there for both. There have been times though it’s been a very difficult professor and I feel for the students. So it’s kind of like ok, we’ll get through this together. That could be anything from teaching style that’s difficult to maybe a really thick accent, where I’m asking them to give me a little bit of slack because I’m really struggling to understand this person with a thick accent. and sometimes it’s the professor who I can see is really slugging it out and a student who is just not engaged at all, doesn’t give any effort, barely shows up for class, and then, you know, I have a hard time

connecting with the student and probably feel more allied with the professor.”

“I personally view the student, the teacher, and the interpreter kind of as a team. We all have a goal, and whether the goal is passing, or getting an A, or just getting the information to the student, or the student getting the information in their head or whatever it is, we work together as a team.”

Becky “We worked really hard when I got into this, we still work hard, but we had a lot of work to do with the professors to accept that we weren’t stealing the stage, we were smart, that we weren’t teacher’s aides. We had to do a lot to convince them that we had brains. And so, over the years, one of the nice things that’s happened is that nice collegiality with the professors. I do socially see sometimes some of the professors”.

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### **Relevant Dialectical Tensions**

**Dialectical tension one: Distance versus closeness.** The most frequent dialectic that comes from this research was distance versus closeness. Because of the lack of interpreter/deaf student based relational dialectics research, it makes sense to build from research based on individuals in a similar role. The graduate teaching assistant (GTA) can be seen as somewhat analogous to an interpreter in a classroom. In a study that explores dialectical tensions of GTAs (Hennings, 2009) research shows that GTAs struggle greatly with the dialectical tensions of distance versus closeness with students. This specific tension is related to the traditional dialectic tension of openness versus protection.

This tension is applicable to university sign language interpreters because, while interpreters are not teachers, nor students, they have commonalities with both; interpreters share professional status with the teacher, while simultaneously may be the only person in the room that shares a language with the deaf student. Interpreters in this study did express the desire to be friendly with students and professors, develop rapport, and use that rapport to better serve the deaf clients with whom they work. As Andrew puts it:

I think it's actually vital to our career [to engage with students]...My personal opinion is that there needs to be a rapport, and the stronger the rapport, the better the interpretation...

I think also it allows me to understand their preferences, their needs as someone who has requested interpreting services and what they are looking for. I guess to sum it up, it allows me to understand the goal better.

As previously discussed, knowing the goals of the interaction is one of the primary ways interpreters can do more than just relay a linguistic message. They are also able to mediate the cultural divide between deaf and hearing individuals and facilitate a more successful interaction.

Interpreters are also expected to be fluent in American Sign Language. The most effective way to do that is by interacting with deaf people in their own language. Therefore, it is important for interpreters to do so and continue to hone their language use.

Ann seconds this sentiment, going on to discuss interaction with deaf students in and outside of the classroom:

What I know about language is, you learn it in your life. And it goes along with culture.

All you do in the classroom is great, but if you're not interacting... So it's part of my job, for me, I feel, to be better at what I do, to interact.

By and large, interpreters also did not want to ask for more interaction than the students wanted to engage in. The relationships are based on how much the students want to engage, and most of the communication and self-disclosing comes from the students. Will illustrated one approach that he uses to make students feel that he is interested in them, but not to pry too much:

I will say to a student "did you have a good break?" as opposed to saying "how was your break?" because "did you have a good break" allows them to say yes or no and then go back to texting or whatever they want to do with that, but if they want to say "yeah! I went skiing..blah blah blah," then I'm open to listening to them. Where if they don't want to talk, I don't want to draw it out of them if they don't want to.

The interpreters in this study were careful when explaining their desire to interact with students against the students' wishes. All of the participants in the study mentioned not wanting to push the students into a conversation with which they were not comfortable. Ann also lets the student direct the depth of the conversation. She gives an example of one relationship with a student:

If they're talking about something that's personal, I appreciate that that person doesn't have a lot of people to talk to, it depends on who it is. There's a woman engineer, and she's in all these classes with men, right? So here I come...And she is real quiet but she likes this. And she'll talk about her girlfriend, and slowly she starts to talk about these things. I'm comfortable with that because she's not saying anything, like, deep. She's just using the time when it's available. She's with these guys, in this program. I keep it light, I don't add mine... The key for me is to not let that be an opening for a conversation. It's more like, that's what she wants right now, and I can dig that because we connect.

The desires for interaction and its benefits are not without their counterpart. Interpreters are careful about what and how much they share with the students they work with. While interpreters will sometimes let students talk about more personal topics, the interpreters themselves are typically more conservative in their own self-disclosure. Britt remarks that when it comes to his personal life, most details are off-limits:

Generally whatever's happening in my personal life, I try to keep things more generic. I don't ask them about their personal life. I try and find things that we maybe have in common; I might use some more general topics like, you know, their major, where they are in the program, or what did you do this weekend, or something like that.

Barb also speaks to keeping her personal issues and information to herself, not wanting to burden the students she works with with her own personal dilemmas, especially when that could detract from her interpreting work:

I watch what I share, I don't use my students as a nice place, or a nice repository of my problems...If there's something going on with me that's distracting to me, I make a conscious effort not to bring it into the classroom. I will tell my teamer about it...because

I'm thinking more and more about customer service in my work I don't want to bring that to the classroom, I don't want them to know what's distracting me.

When it comes to the distance versus closeness dialectic, interpreters see personal and professional value in a friendly and personable interaction with their students. These interactions are carefully entered into, remembering professional comportment is paramount and the interaction with students cannot take priority over the academic content. Interpreters are cautious about what they share, and let the students self-disclose what they are comfortable with, instead of soliciting the information from the students.

**Dialectical tension two: Freedom to be independent versus freedom to be dependent.**

The second prominent dialectic that appeared in the research was freedom to be independent versus freedom to be dependent. This dialectic comes from Rawlins' (2000) work in classroom dynamics. The dialectic occurs when an individual wants to assert their own identity and do things on their own, but simultaneously wants to be able to have a safety net, of sorts, when needed. This can come up for interpreters when weighing how much they allow deaf students to be independent and find their own way, and how much they are willing to let the students depend on them. When it comes to the freedom to be independent versus the freedom to be dependent, interpreters also have to balance a number of other concerns, including their inherent necessity in the classroom with a deaf student, their co-role as an employee of the university, as well as an adult in an environment with students who are often younger and less experienced. The interpreters in this study most often reported the willingness to direct students to resources instead of directly offering help or advice.

Barb mentions the desire to give students information that may be beneficial, but is wary about sharing too much:

I naturally just want to help, but there are so many great people we can refer people to.

But when you know something might help, why not just throw it out there? So I struggle with that a little bit.

Ann talks about making sure that if there is any guidance going on, that it should be at the benefit of the student, not to make the interpreter feel good:

You can fall into this trap of caretaking and feeling good about it and thinking it's a good way to be. They're young, they're freshmen, it's so easy, and that doesn't help at all, I don't think. But any adult anywhere would offer the services and I don't think that's wrong.

The struggle on how much help and advice is appropriate was not unique. Many interpreters mentioned feeling conflicted by what they want to do and what they feel is professionally appropriate. Finally, Becky talks about even though she may want to help the students with their personal or academic problems, she realizes that is not always appropriate:

I can get very maternal, and if I'm worried about somebody -this is not suicidal or anything- this is just oh they haven't shown up lately or they look tired. I just know that's not my business and not a place to go. But I'll wonder, I will wonder about them.

These examples, as well as the previously discussed themes, clearly show that interpreters do experience the freedom to be dependent versus freedom to be independent dialectic and use their own approaches and strategies to manage it. The freedom to be dependent versus freedom to be independent dialectic is particularly rife, considering the multiple roles of interpreters, including university representatives. Like the interpreting adage says, when asked what to do in any situation, it depends. Tensions are only manageable as they occur in the specific moment in time.



### Summary

In summary, this study sought to highlight some of the dialectical tensions experienced by sign language interpreters working in a university setting. The study used semi-structured interviews to learn the experiences of eight sign language interpreters. The interpreters were asked about the typical relationships they have with students for whom they interpret, how and when they choose to engage in non-academic conversation with those students, and what kind of conversations they are comfortable having. Using a thematic approach to data analysis, five main themes emerged.

The first was that interpreters value a personable and friendly relationship with the student. Rapport is important, and can improve the interpreter's actual work as well as making the experience more enjoyable for both parties. A personable relationship leads to the trust that is valued between an interpreter and the student. Casual conversation can also provide both the interpreter and the student with a time to see each other's use of language and get used to it. However, interpreters are careful about becoming too personal with students. The interpreters often feel comfortable "lending an ear" to students but are less comfortable self-disclosing personal information.

A second theme that emerged was that many interpreters decide how much to engage the students with whom they work based on the student's level of interest and engagement in the class and/or developing a relationship with the interpreter. Many participants in the study noted that if the student was friendly and wanted to engage in conversation, the interpreter would return that friendliness. However, if the student didn't seem interested in chatting with the interpreter, then the interpreter would not force the relationship. Many interpreters noted that they would let the student self-disclose information, even if the interpreter was not comfortable

disclosing at the same level.

The third theme that appeared in the study was that interpreters saw themselves as adult resources for students, as opposed to people who would actively advise or help students. In many situations, the interpreters mentioned their dual role as campus professionals and adults in the situation and that made them feel confident in the decision to make students aware of their resources and give them opportunities to find and connect with the people they needed. In most cases, after the interpreter made the student aware of the resources, that was the extent of the involvement. In some extreme cases, the interpreters used their affiliation and status as a university staff member to become more involved.

A fourth theme that interpreters noted as important was that the academic material was paramount in the interpreted classroom. It was vital that the interpreters as well as the students are able to differentiate work or active instruction time from down time, or time that is available for socializing. This served multiple purposes, one of which was giving the interpreters a way to redirect a conversation with which they weren't comfortable. They could use the professor or other classroom conversations as a distraction from a conversation that had become too comfortable. Also, by making the classroom material the priority, the interpreters are able to ally themselves and lead to rapport building with the professor.

Finally, the interpreters in the study mentioned some approaches that they use when interacting with the other main player in the classroom situation, the professor. Most interpreters choose to interact with the professor in a collegial way, and view them as part of the team that also includes the interpreter and the deaf student/s. Some interpreters prefer to develop a strong collegial relationship with the professor not only because the interpreters in this study mentioned being more close in age to the professors than the students, but also because it lets the

interpreters become more aware of the professor's goals and idiosyncrasies, which allows the interpreters to be more effective in the situation.

The identification of these themes points to two main relational dialectics at play. First, the openness versus closeness dialectic is evident in the interpreters' desire to build rapport and relationships with the students while maintaining a professional boundary that does not allow for deeply personal conversation. Secondly, the freedom to be dependent versus freedom to be independent dialectic comes up when interpreters both want to be of help to students but at the same time realize the need to allow college students to find their own way.

### **Limitations**

One limitation of this study is the small number of participants. This study did not seek to make generalizations about all interpreters, but to highlight and find themes within the stories of a few. However, with more stories may come more perspectives. Additionally, the participants in this study were relatively homogenous in age and experience. The participants were self-selected and accepted on a first come, first served basis. This did not allow for intentional diversity, which would have offered different insights. Finally, the interpreters in the study were selected from a sample in one environment. While the findings can be indicative about what happens in that environment, they cannot be generalized to all university interpreted environments.

Finally, the researcher's own involvement with the university interpreting community can be viewed as a limitation. While allowing some insight into the topic, it could also have narrowed the view and affected the interpretations of participants' responses.

### **Implications**

This study contributes multiple insights for sign language interpreters working in a university classroom. In terms of current working interpreters and students in interpreting

training programs, the idea that is most salient to take away is that professional interaction and socialization is not a detriment, but a benefit to your practice. Interpreters who are comfortable having light and friendly conversations may not only improve their own interpreting work, but improve the classroom environment for everyone involved. Additionally, interpreting students and working interpreters can use the results of this study as a guide to managing their own relationships in classrooms and broadening their perspectives.

### **Directions for Further Study**

This was an exploratory study, one that has brought up many further questions and avenues for continued study. One possibility of further study would be to investigate more detailed strategies for handling the dialectical tensions that arise in interpreted classrooms. What do the interpreters actually do when they feel tensions? While some responses alluded to those strategies, they were not the primary goal of this study, and warrant their own research. Also, a study of how interpreter age/experience affects the communication considerations and dialectical tensions would be an interesting topic for further study. In this research, the interview participants were relatively homogenous and it would be interesting to take a deeper look at how age and experience change the interpreters' perspectives.

### **Conclusions**

This study sought to build on the current knowledge of sign language interpreting, classroom interactions, and relational dialectics theory. By using semi-structured interviews, multiple communication considerations and relevant relational dialectics were uncovered. Interpreters voiced their preference for a warm classroom environment, one where there is good rapport and trust between the student/s, professor, and interpreter. This study will not only contribute to the current literature on university sign language interpreting, but hopefully also be

used as a guide for interpreters who are struggling to understand how to manage classroom relationships.

The main point that I hope readers will take away from this research is that of professional friendliness, or personability. It is not necessary for interpreters to be invisible or robotic conduits of language. Interpreters are, and should be, regarded as team members and participants in the shared experience and culture of the university classroom. By using the personable but not personal (Witter-Merithew, lecture, January 8, 2015), or teaching (and interpreting) as a mode of friendship (Rawlins 2000), interpreters can build trust and rapport, thereby improving their interpreting ability. Additionally, it is my hope that interpreters will feel comfortable talking about their work in an open and candid way that allows us to share strategies that benefit our field as a whole. While tensions are inherent in our lives, we can, together, find ways to work effectively and happily in the university classroom.

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## Appendix:

## Interview Questions

1. How long have you been working as an interpreter? How long have you been working in the post-secondary environment?
2. Can you describe a typical relationship with a deaf student?
3. Are you comfortable engaging with deaf students in conversations that are outside the course topics?
  - a. are there any topics that you consciously choose not to discuss?
  - b. Do you do this more with some students than others?
    1. How do you determine when and with whom you engage in conversations?
4. Do you feel more allied with the professor or the deaf student?
  - a. Does it differ based on class? How?
5. Are there instances where your relationship with a student has developed into a friendship?
6. Have you ever had an experience where a student wanted to develop a relationship with which you were not comfortable?
7. Do you ever advise or help deaf students with personal or academic topics?
  - a. Do you consider this outside of your 'role'? Why or why not?
8. Do you have a method for setting boundaries with students?
9. What strategies do you use for managing relationships with students?