

Beyond VRS: Video Interpreting in Postsecondary Environments

Deaf people and interpreters alike have become accustomed to Video Relay Services (VRS). According to the GA-SK Newsletter, April – June, 2003, video interpreting (VI) has been used in the United States by Deaf people in the telephone relay environment since 2000, with many Video Relay Service (VRS) businesses established in 2002 and 2003. Using VI in the postsecondary classroom environment is a newer endeavor. A recent survey of 110 institutions by the Midwest Center for Postsecondary Outreach found that only four campuses used or provided VI, some using portable equipment and others using classrooms equipped for distance learning courses. My campus, the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM), has been experimenting with video interpreting for a campus in another part of Wisconsin. (This project was sponsored by UWM, the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development and the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation.) We learned much in the early days of our work and continue to look for ways to improve our service.

To examine postsecondary VRI, we can compare it to VRS through the lens of the four parameters established by Mary Lightfoot for the Spring 2005 Gallaudet online course, "Video Interpreting: What is it? What can it be?" They are: ergonomics, legal, interpreting and technology.

Ergonomics and Legal

The ergonomics are relatively similar between VRS and VI in postsecondary: an interpreter sits in front of a computer, works within a specified

signing space and needs to be aware of the placement of the computer screen to avoid body and eye fatigue. Beyond ergonomics, according to our experience, postsecondary VI and VRS are quite different. The legal parameters are significantly different because VRS is bound to follow FCC guidelines, which imposes certain legal requirements and restrictions. In the postsecondary arena, the VI interpreters are likely bound by university policies and the RID or NAD codes of ethics. The comparison between VRS and postsecondary VI is even more complex when we analyze other parameters.

Interpreting issues similar in the two environments are clothing, background, lighting, fatigue, working in a two dimensional environment and the stress of new working conditions. Beyond those, the nature of interpreting in postsecondary VI is quite different from VRS. First consider content. In the VRS telephone environment, interpreters do not know the topic of a call. Because VI postsecondary courses are pre-arranged, the interpreter will likely know the course and consumers in advance. With appropriate preparation materials, a postsecondary interpreter will simply refer to the course syllabus and prepare accordingly.

A second difference: VRS interpreters must accommodate a wide variety of signing styles and regional differences. This might also happen in postsecondary VRS situations if we begin interpreting for courses taking place anywhere in the United States, which is certainly a possibility for the near future. In general, however, interpreters and consumers would ideally remain the same for one semester.

Turn-taking is an important issue in VRS interpreting. Phone calls have a prescribed etiquette and expected turn-taking. Postsecondary work has standard turn-taking behaviors also, though if a course is mostly lecture, there would be little or no turn-taking. This issue does surface during small group work or in participatory classes, and then the issues are complex. The interpreter needs to be aware of the group dynamics and turn-taking behavior even though s/he cannot always see the entire class at the remote site. This is one obvious complicating factor that is generally not present in VRS. A postsecondary classroom can contain anything from a handful of students to hundreds, each class providing its own unique set of circumstances for the interpreter. The VRS environment is more static: it is usually a Deaf person making a phone call via VRS. In the postsecondary environment the interpreter often cannot see all of the students, the faculty member or the classroom board or screen. While there are several similarities between the VRS and postsecondary VI, there are clearly more differences.

Technology

While both VRS and postsecondary VI require some of the same basic technology and equipment, there is one major difference. VRS does not require two-way audio with the full-motion video required for interpreting. When VRS interpreters are working, they are communicating in sign language with the Deaf consumers and speaking into a telephone to a hearing consumer. The requirement of two-way audio to receive the sound of the postsecondary

classroom further complicates the technological aspects for that work. Another technology difference: Some VRS companies have installers who set up the cameras/equipment in Deaf consumers' homes. In the postsecondary environment, and in our case, we rely on the expertise of those working at the remote university to purchase the appropriate portable equipment and test the connection between the classroom where the course will be held. This might require many hours of work for both our program and the remote university. On the positive side, once the equipment has been purchased and a student trained in its use, it is generally easy to launch another course at a later date in a different room on the same campus.

Suggestions for the Future

While the postsecondary environment is ripe for the use of VRI because of the ongoing shortage of interpreters, there is room for much research and improvement. A few suggestions for improvement on issues raised above:

- Standardization of technology/equipment: It would be helpful if the university/agency providing the postsecondary interpreting would purchase start-up sets of equipment including a camera, software and necessary microphones and batteries to be sent to institutions purchasing the service. This equipment could be lent to them for a semester and the cost then rolled into the overall service fee. In addition, research is needed to determine a variety of options to get reliable, portable, two-way

sound for different classroom environments, and the best software to allow for full access to the remote classroom.

- Orientation for remote participants: Because this service is relatively new, it would serve everyone well if an orientation was available for the faculty member and the student. In a live classroom situation, it is much easier to get necessary materials and handouts and establish rapport with the faculty member. Video interpreting requires that the interpreter get handouts or overheads before the class, either via e-mail, fax or an online classroom tool.
- Turn-taking: To facilitate turn-taking during small group work, a wireless microphone, not a central table microphone or microphone in a camera, could be passed among the group participants. If the deaf student is using a laptop, the interpreter is rendered nearly invisible to other students so it is easy for them to assume that the interpreter is able to handle anything, even if they are all talking at the same time. Passing a microphone will make it easier for the interpreter to handle the flow of the discussion.

These are small, specific examples to improve the work in the postsecondary VI environment. There is much more we can consider as we forge new developments in VI and VRS. Perhaps there will be more collaboration between universities and VRS call centers. California State University Northridge has already investigated job-sharing situations with a VRS company, understanding that there will be more competition for the

best interpreters in cities housing VRS call centers, according to Lauren Kinast, Coordinator of Interpreting Services. (PEPNet Listserv post, January, 2005) Universities and VRS providers could go a step beyond job sharing and consider providing VI out of VRS call centers.

While postsecondary VI certainly faces challenges, the popularity of VRS has shown that Deaf people have become comfortable with remote technology; using VI in postsecondary environments seems the likely next step to providing more accessibility for Deaf students.

References

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