

MEETING THE TEACHING, LEARNING AND SUPERVISORY NEEDS OF A DEAF POSTGRADUATE STUDENT: A FIRST TIME EXPERIENCE

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This paper shares a university lecturer's first time experience in the teaching, learning and supervision of a deaf student at the master's level. The focus of the paper is on the simple strategies that can be included in the teaching-learning activities in order to meet the deaf student's needs. In-front-of-class teaching and one-on-one supervision are two different teaching-learning settings but the strategies used in both can complement each other. At the beginning of the semester it was assumed that the availability of the services of a sign language interpreter would take care of the deaf student's learning needs; however as the semester unfolds, it became obvious that other strategies were needed to address the Deaf student's specific difficulties. In the absence of relevant learning support services to address these difficulties, it is important to have regular discussions with the Deaf student, the hearing students and the sign language interpreter in order to identify and agree on strategies that work for everyone involved.

Keywords: Deaf student, learning support strategies, sign language interpreter

In Malaysia, the deaf communicate through the medium of *Bahasa Isyarat Malaysia*-Malaysian Sign Language – widely known as BIM or MySL. The Deaf differentiate themselves from the hearing-impaired and refer to the latter as those who have a hearing loss of any degree, are likely to wear hearing aids and able to communicate through the spoken language (Clark, 2007). In 1989, there were 756 Deaf students in the secondary schools (Lim, et. al., 2006) in Malaysia. Today, the number of Deaf students has increased but only a small fraction is pursuing tertiary level education in local universities.

In 2009, a Deaf student registered in the Masters in Linguistics programme at a public university. As there are no structured or specific learning support services available for Deaf students at the university, specific teaching-learning strategies had to be identified to ensure that the Deaf student is provided with the opportunities for optimum participation in the teaching-learning process. Most hearing lecturers do not know BIM and those who do have a limited knowledge of it. As such, the Deaf student relies mainly on the services of the sign language

interpreter provided to help him follow lectures and communicate with the other members of the campus community. A lecturer who has never had a Deaf student in her class is likely to initially find the student's presence a 'problem' only to realize later that simple adjustments to the existing practices could be the solution to the problem deemed initially daunting. Students who are Deaf or hard of hearing are generally supported according to their specific impairment and the restrictions the impairment impose on their classroom participation. McLean et al. (1999) suggest that for those with mild to moderate forms of hearing loss, participation can be facilitated by providing them with preferential seating (usually at the front of the class) or with hearing augmentation devices. For students with more significant levels of hearing loss, note takers may be considered. For Deaf students sign language interpreters are considered. Note takers are trained to take down the key concepts communicated in a lecture in conventional note form, not provide a verbatim transcript of instruction. This type of notes are useful only to students who have a reasonable level of speech comprehension and who are able to focus exclusively on the speaker's speech (for those with mild to moderate hearing impairment) or the sign language interpreter's signing (for Deaf students) without the distraction of taking notes simultaneously. It is less effective for Deaf students whose speech comprehension is low. The gaps that arise between what the speaker conveys, what is perceived, and what is documented in the form of notes can complicate things for the Deaf student.

This article shares some of the experiences of teaching and supervising a Deaf student at the postgraduate level. It is hoped that the sharing will help in understanding the challenges Deaf students face and the strengths they bring with them from past experience in the academic setting which enabled the lecturer concerned to make modifications to the existing way of delivering knowledge, information and classroom management. These strategies are still rudimentary and are based mainly on ongoing collaborations with one Deaf student and a sign language interpreter.

Introducing Chong

Chong is a 29 year-old male Chinese who was born deaf with no known birth complications, to hearing parents. Chong is at the end of his fourth semester in the Masters in Linguistics programme. The experiences shared here are based on his participation in a core course, Applied Linguistics and in the supervision of his master's dissertation.

Past academic experiences and challenges

Although Chong has hearing aids and has had private speech training in English and Bahasa Malaysia from the age of three, he prefers to communicate through writing, typing, gesturing and through BIM. As a child, Chong did not attend

pre-school or kindergarten. At age seven, he started formal education in an urban government school where there was a special class for deaf children under the charge of a small group of specially trained teachers capable of teaching the mainstream subjects using coded sign language in Malay (*BMKT - Bahasa Melayu Kod Tangan* [Hand Coded Malay Language]). Where hearing children attend 6 years of primary education, Chong took 8 years to complete his primary education. He had to do 2 years each for Year 1 and Year 6. He was 15 years old when he moved on to secondary school, again in a special class for deaf children.

Chong recalled how he felt frustrated during his first six months at the school as he felt the teachers were not teaching them anything although they were very proficient in *BMKT*. There was no proper timetable and the deaf children did little learning during school hours. Feeling dissatisfied with the situation, Chong remembered persistently pushing the teachers to do more in educating them. He confronted the teachers and wrote numerous letters of complaint to the school authorities. His persistence soon got the teachers to structure a proper study schedule for all the deaf students at his school. Whenever a teacher was late in coming to class, Chong would go look for the teacher to remind him/her to come to class. Whenever a teacher did not give them homework, he would identify exercises from the textbooks for homework and would ask the teacher to tell all the deaf students in his class to do the work. When his classmates complained of too much homework, he would tell them homework is good for them.

He caused so many problems for the special class teachers that the school later suggested that he join the mainstream class. After discussing with his mother, they jointly decided he should try it for a month. After a month, Chong did not see himself improving so he asked to stay on for another month. One month led to another and in the end not only did Chong stay in the mainstream class until the end of the school year, he also came out top of the class. This spurred him to continue studying in mainstream class for the rest of his secondary education, even though there was no sign language interpreting or other learning support services provided for him.

As there was no learning support services provided for him, and due to his low speech comprehension, Chong could not understand most of what was going on in class but that did not deter him. He used his hearing aids in class but found that he could only understand less than 10% of the lessons. He did his homework, submitted them on time and whenever an examination approached, he read the textbooks/reference books/workbooks from page to page one to two days before the examination. In the Malaysian school system, there are three exams in each academic year, so Chong read these books three times each year. He followed this system over the first three years of secondary school and managed to do relatively well academically. However, during his upper secondary years at Forms 4 and 5, he began to realize that the subjects were getting more challenging and his study system which worked well before was beginning to fail him especially for practical subjects such as Chemistry, Physics and

Additional Mathematics. But through sheer hard work and determination, Chong managed to pass his *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* with enough credits to obtain a scholarship to pursue a diploma followed by a degree in Computer Studies at a private college. Having not improved his speech comprehension much, Chong found that college was not easy. He had applied for sign language interpreting services but the college did not have the resources to provide such services. Upon graduation, he secured a job with a computer company but after 2 years in employment, he decided to quit and pursue a Masters in Linguistics.

Current observations

The many challenges Chong had faced throughout his primary and secondary education have had a significant influence on how he approached the masters level course. He has accepted the fact that he would not have any substantial learning support services so he has stopped asking for them. He has also learnt to manage within these exceptional circumstances. Although the faculty provided him with a sign interpreter for all his classes, it is not entirely sufficient. The sign interpreter, who also acts as a confidante for Chong, revealed that Chong often felt frustrated after each lecture because while he felt he understood the lecture, he could not synthesise and consolidate the information provided into knowledge gained. He could not transfer what he felt he knew into the written assignments. Linguistics is a new area for him and one of the major difficulties he has is in understanding the linguistic concepts and theories discussed used during lectures. The sign language interpreter too found it difficult to sign the concepts and theories as she is not familiar with the linguistic terms. In class, Chong must focus on the sign language interpreter so he could not look at the lecturer or the PowerPoint presentation, or take down notes. In cases where there is no direct word-to-sign equivalent the interpreter had to resort to paraphrasing or finger spelling, both of which will take longer to do and in the process, she missed some of the things the lecturer was saying. As Chong has been used to resorting to his own resources, he was not in the habit of seeking for help or clarification from the lecturer or from his classmates, although both were offered to him on many occasions.

Chong tried to resolve his lack of understanding by reading the PowerPoint slides before the class and then referring to the slides right after the class, in order to recall what was discussed in class. He also found it a helpful strategy to read up on the topic for the week before and after the class. However, being one who is into electronic devices, he felt that if the faculty could provide him with a note-taker who could type out the lecture as it is being delivered it would be very helpful as he can then 'see' the lectures on the screen. His past experiences have also led Chong to not like to discuss with the lecturer or his course-mates because he finds it frustrating trying to communicate his intentions to non-signers. Chong also found it equally unsatisfying to communicate through an interpreter. He does not like group work either, but if he has to do it, he

would let the hearing members to carry on the discussion and then tell him his portion of the work. Group discussion is difficult even with the services of an interpreter because too many people are talking at the same time which can be very confusing when interpreted through signing – the flow of the discussion ends up garbled and incoherent.

In light of all these observations, various adjustments were made to the pre- and post-classroom practices. These strategies were found to be also useful in the dissertation supervision sessions. Instead of calling him in for face-to-face consultations, the lecturer started by emailing him questions and encouraging him to email in his queries. This proved quite effective in getting Chong to open up and ask for help. As his questions became more complex, the lecturer suggested communicating through on-line chatting so a discussion can be carried out as opposed to the earlier email-respond format where Chong had to wait longer for a reply. The lecturer also suggested other members of the class to offer their lecture notes to Chong to supplement the PowerPoint slides. As Chong did not feel comfortable ‘talking’ with his course-mates, he was allowed to do all his assignments alone instead of in a group. Efforts in getting the other students to be more interactive with Chong proved to be less successful. Malaysian students are not yet receptive to the presence of students with different circumstances in their learning environment. Chong would have benefitted from discussions with his course-mates. The effort to get them to talk to each other was even less successful due to Chong’s own set ways – he prefers to do things on his own. He did however create a group mail for the class through which some of the students (including Chong) exchange notes and send messages to each other. In many ways this move also helped the other students to enhance their learning. Through the second half of the semester, the students were encouraged to go into the e-forum channel set up in the university interactive *SPECTRUM* system. This mode of learning is still new to UM students, as such not all the students had fully utilised it. However, it has the potential of being an effective learning tool for both Chong and the other students.

The semester coursework included 2 tasks, an 800 word critical analysis of an article, to be presented using PowerPoint and then submitted in essay form; and a 2000 word mini project also to be presented in PowerPoint and essay form. It was soon observed that Chong did not fully understand the tasks given both verbally and in printed form, although he said he did understand. Through his sign language interpreter the lecturer requested that he email his outline for both the assignments so he can be guided accordingly. Although this was not a problem unique to Chong, other students would usually be able to get on with the work after a few consultations with the lecturer. Since Chong did not come to discuss his work, detailed feedback was given using the *Track Changes* tool on *Word*. His reply was one of appreciation as the *Track changes* proved to be effective in making him have a better understanding of what is required. Therefore apart from the on-line chatting, Chong received all of his written work feedback through *Track changes*.

Chong has successfully completed all his coursework and is now writing up his dissertation. It was anticipated at first that supervision, which is conducted on a one-on-one basis, would be more manageable than classroom interaction. However supervision sessions with Chong have also brought to light other issues worth pointing out. Although feedback and issues to be raised during the face-to-face meetings have been provided in advance through email and track changes on the chapter drafts, these are not sufficient as new issues arise when Chong comes in for face-to-face discussions. The interpreting during supervision sessions can be fast-paced as the issues are raised and it can be halting at times when Chong or the SLI are confronted with ambiguous messages. Since BIM captures the total meaning of certain expressions or sentences that are common in spoken language, it can be difficult for the SLI to find the appropriate word or structure to match Chong's signs and vice versa with the supervisor's speech. In this sense, the SLI's knowledge and experience in Chong's academic area, and her constant interactions and contact with the Deaf community, are important sources for on-the-spot solutions.

Apart from the difficulties in getting the right message across during the face-to-face sessions, problems also arise in the written documents Chong produce. Chong's low speech comprehension can be mediated by the sign language interpreter, but his low speech comprehension is also reflected in his written work. He writes in the form and structure of BIM, as such there is often difficulties in understanding what he is trying to convey in his chapter drafts. The grammar and syntax he uses are different and the way he expresses his ideas are too simple and blunt leading to serious cohesion and coherence problems. In a public university setting, the masters dissertation is written to be evaluated by examiners who look for a certain level of competency in academic writing. Without a systematic analysis of his written work, it is not possible to comment on the specific problems Chong faces with academic writing. Due to the mismatch between time constraints, Chong's writing ability and the expectations of a postgraduate examination, the drafts had to be proofread, edited and revised many times over before being judged as sufficiently acceptable.

The Sign Language Interpreter's (SLI) Perspective

According to the SLI, there is a serious shortage of sign language interpreters in Malaysia. In a higher education context, interpreting work is demanding because information transmission is dense and utilises complex language. Ideally, for a 3 hour class, two interpreters should be provided so each can take alternating turns of 20 minute slots, as fatigue from the aerobic like demands of signing can affect the interpreter's accuracy. There are also other inherent difficulties associated with interpreting in a higher education context. As mentioned earlier, only a small number of Deaf people have been successful in their journey to tertiary education. The low involvement of the Deaf in tertiary education means less exposure of BIM to academic registers which are discipline

specific. The SLI interviewed in for this article said that in the absence of the appropriate signs, more often she would manually fingerspell rather than sign many of the discipline specific words and concepts. This can affect the clarity of the knowledge and the information imparted from the lecturer to the student. Since the number of Deaf tertiary students over the years is small, there has not been any initiative to discuss the inclusion of discipline specific vocabulary or the lexicalisation of finger spelling into BIM.

When she does sign language interpreting for students like Chong, she does more than just interpreting. On occasions, she has to address his frustrations and emotional needs when the academic challenges he faces become too overwhelming. In this context, the SLI feels that it would be of great help to Deaf students if their lecturers/supervisors could make the effort to learn how to sign even at the basic level. She also feels that the other students in the class could help the Deaf students if they could make the effort to communicate with them. Observations of classroom events revealed that most times, the other students are 'afraid' to take the initiative to communicate with Chong. Even when they wanted to say something to Chong, they would direct their questions meant for Chong to SLI or to the lecturer. When they were asked why this is so, most students in Chong's class replied it was because they could not sign, forgetting that there are other ways of communicating with Chong (for example through writing and gesturing). Even after a lot of encouragement from the lecturer and SLI, the students did not make any serious efforts to do so. Interacting with the Deaf requires a change in behaviour and attitude. This will take longer than just one semester of being in the same class and requires the combined and persistent reminders from all parties concerned. For now, the communication between Chong and the other students (although infrequently) is conducted through the group email and e-forum channels. So much could be achieved academically if other students could overcome this communication barrier to include Chong in his study or research groups and even in class interactions.

The SLI found the level of interpreting for Chong during the supervision sessions more challenging than the interpreting for Chong's lectures. Where Chong's lectures are concerned, the SLI had the PowerPoint slides to refer to whenever she got stuck with difficult terminology or a concept. During supervision sessions, the discussions are more intense and field specific, so she has to sometimes stop and go, interrupting the flow of discussion and risking losing some points.

It has been identified in the literature (Knuckley et al., 2001) that due to their difficulty with literacy, text based support systems may not be the best way to communicate with the Deaf, that they would understand information better if it is represented in a visual (non textual) form. However, with Chong, as with many Deaf individuals in this century, text-based communication and information from sources such as the Internet, instant messaging, SMS, and subtitles are the preferred form in all domains (personal, entertainment, social and academic). Personal experiences with Chong in the supervision sessions indicate that text

based communication does help in relaying the message but not without breakdowns. Oftentimes, the messages have to be repeated several times and reworded. The SLI too plays an active role in interpreting the text-based communication.

CONCLUSION

One valuable lesson learnt is that instead of lamenting the lack of support services, open discussions with the parties concerned, in this case the Deaf, useful strategies that work can be identified. Lecturers and other students need to unlearn habitual behaviour – things we, hearing people, take for granted. Chong cannot take down notes/type out notes because he has to look at the interpreter signing to him. He cannot tape record the lectures because he cannot hear. But if there is someone who can transcribe the lectures on the spot with the help of a machine, that would be of help. But in the absence of this, the lecturer can make notes – summarise the lectures or have a pool of student volunteers to type out their lecture notes for him – so he has something printed to remind him of what was said and discussed in class. Other strategies which were found useful for Chong are:

- Provide PowerPoint presentations with additional notes typed at the bottom of the page
- Send the slide show to the student a week in advance
- Suggest relevant readings to accompany lectures
- Provide same materials to the sign language interpreter
- Conduct a session with the interpreter before lectures to clarify issues/topics
- Slow down when talking and speak clearly
- Remind other students to indicate that they are about to say something
- Stop periodically to ask
- Encourage other students to write down their questions to be given to the interpreter and the Deaf student so the latter can be involved in the ensuing discussion
- Encourage the Deaf student to ask questions and to respond to classmates' questions
- Give him time to compose his responses
- Give the interpreter time to sign the message
- Repeat important parts (Lecturers and hearing students)
- Encourage the Deaf student to discuss with lecturers – always have an open dialogue to benefit both sides
- Go over lectures with him – one-on-one
- Provide track changes as feedback on his assignments and drafts of his dissertation - keep the comments simple / straightforward so he can tell the difference between corrections and suggestions

Lecturers tend to take an unobtrusive attitude towards his existence in class for fear of being perceived as giving him special favours due to his disability — responding only when he makes the first move. Chong has learnt to survive in his own way and most of the time, in silence. Chong, for example, prefers to study on his own but at the tertiary and especially the post-graduate level, this is not the best or the most effective strategy. Conversations with him through his sign language interpreter reveal that Chong does not ask for help because he says he does not want to burden anyone. He believes that it is the hearing who should make an effort to learn sign language because he cannot learn how to speak, but he understands that would be too much to ask of others. Chong would not ask for help but he does welcome help, and that the opportunity for communication has to be offered to him.

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