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## Reconceptualizing educational interpreting: A case study in US K–12 classroom

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### Abstract

In response to students' right to education, interpreting services have been provided to a subset of English language learners (ELLs) in the United States to make educational opportunities accessible to them. This qualitative case study delves into the nature of the interpreting services, focusing on exploring the varied responsibilities undertaken by interpreters in K–12 classrooms within a Northeastern US public school district. Data were collected through interviews and documentation and analyzed thematically combined with the constant comparative technique. The study reveals that the ELLs the interpreters worked with had diverse backgrounds, including learners with interrupted education, potential learning disabilities, and varying academic foundations. Though the interpreters were initially required to interpret instruction to make the curriculum accessible, in practice they often extended their roles to serve as instructional aides, advocates, and social-emotional guides. This expansion partly stemmed from the inherent interplay between content and language learning in educational settings and was partly driven by the interpreters' shared experiences and empathy for ELLs. The study advocates for a reconceptualization of interpreters' roles and responsibilities and providing expanded training programs that reflect interpreters' everyday practices. Furthermore, it calls for a shift toward culturally responsive interpreting that acknowledges the multilingual and multicultural nature of educational settings.

**Keywords:** educational interpreters, English language learners, K–12 classrooms, roles and responsibilities, language access

## 1. Introduction

The enrollment of linguistically and culturally diverse students within US K–12 schools, that is, primary and secondary education, has seen a consistent rise over the recent years, leading to a notable increase in the population of English language learners (ELLs)—students whose primary language is not English and who are actively acquiring English proficiency (Bardack 2010). For many ELLs, access to the general education curriculum and participation in school discourse within an English-only environment are facilitated, in part, by the services of spoken language educational interpreters (Smith 2015; Winston 2015).

The concepts of educational interpreting and interpreted education are grounded in language access and equality and the right to access meaningful education (Winston 2015; Ledesma 2021). Title VI of the US Civil Rights Act of 1964 (see US Department of Justice 2024) prohibits discrimination based on race, ethnicity, or national origin in federally funded educational programs (Kaufman, Bailey & Mosher 1969). This legislation underscores the requirement for the provision of special language assistance and the promotion of linguistic access for students from linguistically minoritized groups (Abarca & Allen 2019). Further, it is pointed out that “schools must provide translation or interpretation from appropriate and competent individuals and may not rely on or ask students, siblings, friends, or untrained school staff to translate or interpret for parents” (US Department of Justice & US Department of Education 2015b). The landmark case of *Lau v. Nichols* further emphasized this principle when the Supreme Court ruled that the San Francisco Unified School District’s failure to provide adequate education to non-English-speaking students violated the students’ Fourteenth Amendment (United States 1868) rights, denying them equal educational opportunities (Sugarman & Widess 1974; Bon 2008). This ruling catalyzed the passage of the Equal Educational Opportunity Act of 1974, which mandated equal educational opportunities for all individuals, regardless of race, color, or national origin (Berenyi 2008). In response to these legal mandates, programs tailored to address ELLs’ special needs, such as bilingual education and English as a second language (ESL), were gradually formulated and implemented

nationwide (US Department of Education 2020). Failure to provide interpretation services may render districts liable under federal law (US Department of Justice & US Department of Education 2021).

The educational landscape in Massachusetts has also evolved over time in efforts to enhance linguistic access for ELLs. Notably, in 1971, Massachusetts became the first state in the nation to mandate the provision of instruction and educational materials in students' primary languages if they lacked English proficiency (Owens 2010). However, in 2002, the state shifted to an English-only policy, prohibiting bilingual education and adopting sheltered immersion (SEI) techniques. These techniques integrate ELLs into mainstream classrooms and deliver all academic content in English to students with limited English proficiency (Owens 2010). Nevertheless, in 2011, the US Department of Justice (2011) identified a violation of the Equal Educational Opportunities Act (EEOA) pertaining to the state's SEI implementation, citing inadequate training for qualified educators and a failure to ensure that ELLs received mandated services. Subsequently, in 2017, the educational landscape saw a transformation with the passage of the LOOK (Language Opportunity for Our Kids) Act. This legislation grants school districts the flexibility to provide bilingual classrooms for students who are not fluent in English, allowing school districts to select high-quality, research-based language acquisition programs tailored to the needs of ELLs (Amorim 2023; Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education 2023b). The shift has been seen as a positive step in providing more opportunities for students; it also contributes to promoting bilingualism and biculturalism among all students (Massachusetts Teacher Education 2018). Moreover, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (2023a) mandates schools to offer oral language interpretation services in compliance with Title VI of Civil Rights Act of 1964, providing guidelines for ensuring the provision of trained interpreters in schools.

## 2. Spoken language educational interpreting

Educational interpreting falls within the broader scope of community interpreting. Community interpreting "is a type of interpreting that takes place

between people who live in the same ‘community,’ society or country but who do not share a common language” (Hale 2015, 65). It extends across diverse settings such as hospitals, schools, courtrooms, and community services (Bancroft 2015). Educational interpreters, specifically, operate within school contexts, facilitating effective communication and providing access to educational resources for students who speak a language other than English (Abarca & Allen 2019). They engage in various school activities such as standardized testing, parent-teacher conferences, individualized education program (IEP) meetings, assemblies, classroom instruction, and training (Siebach 2023).

While other fields of community interpreting have enjoyed great development in terms of professionalization, training, and certification in recent years, such as healthcare and court interpreting (Mazzei & Aibo 2023), educational interpreting, especially spoken language interpreting, lags behind. Despite many school districts having translation and interpreting departments, a substantial number of the interpreters “have not taken valid proficiency tests, been given any substantive training, been sent to conferences, or encouraged to join professional associations” (Abarca & Allen 2019, under “What is Educational Interpreting?”). Moreover, bilingual staff members without formal training are often tasked with ad hoc interpreting. Child language brokering (CLB) instances, where young individuals translate or interpret for non-English-speaking family members, have also been documented in both formal and informal educational settings (Crafter 2018).

The absence of dedicated professional associations for educational interpreters and translators has contributed to the stagnant development of professionalization in the field. The recent formation of the American Association of Interpreters and Translators in Education (AAITE) signifies a growing recognition of the significance of and need for formal training of educational interpreters, clear ethical standards, and the establishment of best practices in the field.

In line with the slow development of professionalization in educational interpreting (Mellinger 2023), the field is largely under-researched, particularly concerning the specific qualifications and attributes of spoken language interpreters, as well as their actual roles and responsibilities. At present,

the roles of educational interpreters remain loosely defined and subject to variations based on the specific requirements and needs of school districts and individual schools (Kurz & Langer 2004). For instance, research into sign language educational interpreters has demonstrated their multifaceted roles and responsibilities, which include tutoring, consulting (Lawson 2021), serving as an aide (Jones 1993), disciplining, and teaching American Sign Language in the classroom (Hayes 1992) in addition to their primary role as interpreters facilitating sound and communication access. The varied array of settings in which spoken language interpreters may be engaged, coupled with the widespread practice of informal interpreting by bilingual individuals (Tse 1996; Orellana 2009), necessitates a comprehensive exploration of the interpreters' professional role boundaries, responsibilities, and classroom practices.

Existing research in spoken language educational interpreting has predominantly concentrated on three areas: (1) facilitating communication between schools and ELL families (Otey 2015), (2) advancing multicultural research on ELLs (Theobald 2017), and (3) examining interactions between interpreters and speech-language pathologists during ELL assessment (Langdon & Saenz 2015). There remains a research gap concerning the day-to-day roles and practices of interpreters within classrooms. Moreover, the shortage of practice-based training programs, both from university-affiliated and non-university programs and workshops, leads to a divide between the prescribed practices found in textbooks and training materials and the practical experiences of interpreters. This disconnect, coupled with the inadequacy of training resources and trained personnel, further amplifies the issue of inadequate professional recognition for educational interpreters (Smith 2015). These challenges underscore the critical necessity for comprehensive research into the operational dynamics of educational interpreting, as well as the roles and responsibilities of interpreters, especially in light of the legal requirements for ensuring ELLs' meaningful engagement in educational settings.

This study employed a qualitative case study design (Yin 2009) to provide a contextual description of the implementation of the interpreting service at Pond Poet (a pseudonym we employ to refer to a public school district in Northeastern US). Through the analysis of narratives from interpreters,

teachers, and the program coordinator, as well as documents collected, the study intends to describe the interpreters' practices in facilitating ELLs' access to language and education, contributing to a better understanding of their roles and informing the development of interpreter education and training programs aiming at professionalizing the discipline. Furthermore, we advocate for the recognition and support of interpreters, which could, in return, enhance support for ELLs, ensure compliance with legal requirements, and benefit the broader community. Thus, this research holds the potential to advance knowledge on the evolving roles of interpreters in classrooms and provide insights that could inform research on language access, as well as language access policies and practices. The study addressed the following research questions:

- What is the nature of the interpreting service at Pond Poet?
- How do various stakeholders, including interpreters, teachers, the program coordinator, describe the roles and responsibilities of interpreters?

### **3. Methodology**

#### *3.1 Context*

The Pond Poet Public School District, located in a Northeastern US college town, consists of three elementary schools (PreK–6), one middle school (grades 7–9), and one high school (grades 10–12).<sup>1</sup> According to enrollment data from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (2023c), the district had a total enrollment of 2,280 students during the 2022–2023 academic year. The student body was ethnically diverse and consisted of 51.5% White, 20.7% Hispanic, 15.5% Asian, 9.3%

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<sup>1</sup> PreK–6 typically includes children ranging from approximately 3 to 11 years of age. Grades 7–9 typically cover the ages of 12 to 14, while grades 10–12 typically cover the ages of 15 to 17/18.

African American, 8% Multiracial (Non-Hispanic), 0.1% Native American, and 0.1% Native Hawaiian students (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education 2023c). Notably, the district exhibited a higher percentage of non-English speaking students than the state average, with 22.5% speaking languages other than English at home and 9.5% identified as ELLs (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education 2023c).

Against the backdrop of state and federal requirements concerning language access services for non-native English speakers (US Department of Justice & US Department of Education 2015a), the district has implemented an extensive ESL program, featuring SEI techniques in mainstream classrooms, dedicated ELL pull-out sessions, and the provision of interpreting services. SEI entails immersing ELLs in classrooms where English is the primary medium of instruction, with teachers adapting their teaching methods to accommodate varying proficiency levels. ELL pull-out sessions offer specialized instruction delivered by certified ESL teachers to smaller groups of ELL students.

Additionally, the district employs interpreters within mainstream classrooms to interpret teachers' instructions into ELLs' first language and make the content culturally accessible while ELLs are still acquiring English proficiency, with interpreters serving as a crucial bridge to overcome communication barriers and facilitate content learning. The receiver of the service primarily includes ELLs classified within English language proficiency (ELP) levels 1 and 2, based on their performance on the Assessing Comprehension and Communication in English State-to-State for English Language Learners (ACCESS) assessment (Cooney 2020).

### 3.2 Research design

This study employed a qualitative case study design to investigate the provision of the interpreting service. This methodological approach allows for a comprehensive and nuanced depiction of the focal case within its



specific context, enabling a multifaceted understanding from various viewpoints (Stake 1995; Yin 2009). By adopting this methodology, this study focused on exploring specific aspects of the interpreting services, particularly the roles and practices of interpreters. Moreover, this approach helped facilitate an in-depth immersion in the classroom context, fostering a nuanced understanding of how interpreting services are implemented. Therefore, this methodological choice enabled the capture of diverse perspectives from interpreters and stakeholders, facilitating a thorough exploration of the complexities inherent in the service.

### *3.3 Recruitment*

The researchers of the current study collaborated with Amelia, the coordinator of the ESL program at Pond Poet, to devise a recruitment strategy, which included developing outreach emails and screening criteria. Amelia facilitated the distribution of these messages to interpreters and teachers. Due to the pandemic-induced shift to emergency remote teaching, alternative recruitment methods were also employed, such as utilizing LinkedIn and implementing a snowball sampling approach. However, limitations in linguistic and cultural expertise of the first author, along with time and budget constraints, precluded the exploration of perceptions of ELLs and their families relying on bilingual interpreting services. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic and school closures nationwide posed challenges in recruitment, resulting in a reduced sample size for the study. It is important to note that all personal identifiers within this paper have been anonymized using pseudonyms.

### *3.4 Data collection*

To understand the district's interpreting service, data were collected through diverse methods and sources. Semi-structured interviews were

conducted with ten interpreters, five teachers, and the program coordinator to capture diverse perspectives on the service's functioning. These interviews were video-recorded and transcribed verbatim for accuracy and fidelity. Additionally, relevant documents pertaining to the interpreting services, such as district profiles, mission and vision statements, program evaluations from the state's Department of Education, and job postings, were collected. These documents served as supplements to the interview data, providing additional insights into the district's vision and policies related to the service, thereby enhancing the credibility of the study's findings.

### *3.5 Data analysis*

Thematic analysis (TA) (Braun & Clarke 2022) and constant comparison method (CCM) (Glaser & Strauss 2017) were employed to uncover patterns and themes in the collected data, including transcribed and pseudonymized interviews and documentation. An iterative coding process was used, with new codes added as additional themes emerged, creating a hierarchical coding structure (Neale 2016). This process allowed for systematic identification, analysis, and reporting of patterns within the data. CCM facilitated the inductive discovery of "latent patterns in the multiple participant's words through continuous comparison of emerging interpretations" (Glaser 2002, 2). Peer debriefing among the study's authors was conducted to facilitate discussion and validation of research findings and interpretations, ensuring rigor and trustworthiness (Spall 1998).

### *3.6 Ethical considerations*

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the authors' university. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before the interviews. Confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed throughout the research process.

## 4. Navigating the intricacies: Student profiles

### 4.1 Learners with interrupted education

A notable subset of the ELLs in the secondary school at Pond Poet were students with limited or interrupted formal education. This cohort typically comprised refugees and migrants who had experienced disruptions in their formal education. Anthony, a certified medical Spanish-English interpreter with six years of tenure at Pond Poet, drew attention to the challenging backgrounds from which these students came (interview, 1 October 2021):

In this particular [high] school, there's a population that has had a very difficult, not a privileged, upbringing. Many of them come from very humble and difficult places. Places where they were either refugees or fleeing from violence or something, and they're missing a lot of education. Sometimes they have maybe a third-grade level of understanding, and it's not just English, it's in their own language. They have missed many years.

Anthony's account highlighted the profound impact of disrupted education on these students, encompassing not only lower English proficiency but also deficiencies in their first language and fundamental domain knowledge. This underscored the critical need for heightened attention and support from the district.

### 4.2 Learners with potential learning disabilities

The presence of potential learning disabilities among some ELLs, coupled with the challenges in identifying these disabilities upon enrollment, added another layer of complexity to the district's ELL education. Heather, the head of the ELL department at the high school, added her perspective on the placement of ELLs (interview, 10 September 2021):

In recent years, we've had several students who don't have literacy in their first language because they have interrupted education or didn't attend a school that had services for students who might have a cognitive challenge. So we don't make special education referrals, and there is a wait.

The absence of prior diagnoses from home countries, combined with the school's limited knowledge of their educational backgrounds, complicated the decision-making regarding the support services. Therefore, at Pond Poet, determining eligibility for services beyond ESL often required a one-year observation period in the US learning environment.

#### *4.3 Learners with weak academic profiles*

A notable characteristic observed among many of the ELLs was a lack of solid academic foundations. The example below was illustrative, given by Lucas, an experienced academic assessment specialist, former special education Math teacher, Spanish-English interpreter, and paraeducator (interview, 16 September 2022):

It became very quick that he [one student] didn't just need translation. The translation was almost irrelevant because his lack of academic background was really the problem. He was an eighth grader, and I had to go over second-grade level things because he didn't have any skills that were at grade level. All the reading, writing, and math were below grade level.

Lucas's observations underscored the influence of prior academic experiences on individual ELLs at Pond Poet. He pointed out that merely translating and interpreting classroom content had limited benefits for students with significant knowledge gaps, as it failed to provide necessary contextualization knowledge and pedagogical guidance.

The varied backgrounds of the ELLs, including those with interrupted education, learning disabilities, or weak academic foundations, presented

unique challenges for educators at Pond Poet. In the following sections, we delve into the responsibilities shouldered by the interpreters in Pond Poet's classrooms.

## **5. Interpreters as multifaceted facilitators**

Our analysis revealed that interpreters at Pond Poet played a multifaceted role that extended well beyond traditional interpretations (Hale 2007). Despite the school district's official job description primarily focusing on their role as language interpreters for making content accessible to learners, interpreters evolved into versatile assistants and facilitators for ELLs.

In the following section, we delineate four major roles that interpreters reported performing in their daily activities. These roles include interpreting classroom instruction, assisting with class assignments, advocating for additional support for ELLs, and helping students navigate the social and emotional aspects of school life. This will shed light on both their responsibilities and the motivating factors behind their actions.

### *5.1 Interpreters*

Foremost among the interpreters' responsibilities was ensuring ELLs' access to classroom instruction through interpreting, relaying teachers' instruction to comprehensible discourse for learners. However, the investigation of the interpreters' training backgrounds revealed a lack of formal interpreting training among some participants. Out of the ten interpreters interviewed, two held specialized certificates in areas such as medical and conference interpreting, two were graduate students specializing in interpretation, and the remaining six lacked formal training, relying on onboarding programs and learning-by-doing. This aligns with Tiselius's (2022) observation on the inadequate training of community interpreters.

Despite limited prior training, interpreters developed an understanding of interpreting strategies through onboarding and practical experience. For

instance, Cora, an English–Spanish interpreter at the districts’ high school, reported frequently using the “translation using a loan word . . . plus explanation” (Baker 1992, 34) to clarify US culture-centered concepts for her learners. She explained the rationale behind this technique (interview, 23 August 2022):

A lot of times teachers make reference to cultural things that my students are not familiar with, like certain foods or certain music. I have to bring my students up-to-date so they don’t feel left behind in a joke or things like that.

From Cora’s perspective, ELLs tended to lack familiarity with US cultural and contextual concepts, and teachers might not be aware of the gap. Therefore, it was crucial for interpreters to insert additional information to clarify these concepts, thus making them more meaningful for the learners.

Diana, a Mandarin–English interpreter with background in multi-language education, employed consecutive interpretation in kindergarten ESL pull-out classes with simple storybook materials (interview, 27 July 2022):

Particularly in ESL pull-out classes where teachers would read a story using storybooks. She [a kindergartner] couldn’t follow anything at the very first. I would sit next to her, and whenever the teacher read a line from the story, I would interpret it to her. It’s okay to do it because the kindergarten materials are relatively straightforward.

According to Diana’s description the elementary nature of the kindergarten materials enabled her to effectively perform consecutive interpreting to make stories understandable for the kindergartner. Nevertheless, she found consecutive interpreting challenging with more complex subject matter or the rapid pace of teachers’ delivery in higher-grade levels (interview, 27 July 2022):

However, there were times when the teacher spoke so quickly that I wouldn’t be able to do that. For the sixth-grade girl, there were times when teachers would show them documentaries from Discovery, for instance, which I couldn’t interpret sentence by sentence, so I just gave her a rough summary of what it was.

Due to teachers often maintaining a continuous pace without frequent pauses to accommodate interpreters and being unaware of the need to wait for interpreters to convey messages to ELLs, Diana encountered increasing challenges in employing consecutive interpreting, especially when subject complexity escalated. In response, she resorted to content summarization to convey the key points. Furthermore, insights from interpreter interviews indicated that teachers rarely provided materials in advance for interpreters to prepare, and this lack of access to teaching materials adds to the difficulty of interpreting complex topics and concepts.

The goals of interpreting, as well as the nature of language acquisition and content learning in such contexts, also need to be reconsidered. Jan, a Mandarin-English interpreter with a background in bilingual education, reflected on her use of summarization to strike a balance between conveying crucial information and providing fifth-grade ELLs with ample exposure to the English language (interview, 25 July 2022):

Mostly, summarization and filling, because on the one hand, I would be afraid that I might miss something in simultaneous interpreting. On the other hand, I want the kids to hear the English language, fully. What I normally do is that, whatever I think is important, I want them to listen to it first, and then I will ask if they understand or if they know what to do next.

Considering the acquisition of English language, providing learners with ample exposure to the language was beneficial for their proficiency. Previous research consistently indicates that children learn languages more effectively through communication and immersion rather than strict rule-based learning (Cummins 2009). The immersion approach adopted by both Jan and Diana could be more effective compared to relying solely on translation and interpreting as a language learning method.

However, when considering the comprehension of content, it is reasonable to argue that summarization could lead to unintentional information loss. The preference for summarization could also potentially suggest that some interpreters may lack comprehensive linguistic and interpreter training, resorting

to it as an alternative approach. Hence, the effectiveness of this practice ultimately hinged upon interpreters' understanding of students' cognitive capabilities and their skill in balancing brevity and comprehensive transmission. Additionally, providing interpreters with preparatory time and curriculum materials in advance could enhance their familiarity with subject matter and reduce the risk of information loss.

The narratives from the interpreters showcased the intricate nature of interpreting in K–12 classrooms. Though the interpreters were initially employed to make instruction accessible to learners, it became evident that their role involved both linguistic and content learning aspects, making it challenging to neatly delineate the boundaries of their responsibilities. Furthermore, there was occasional tension between the interpreting technique and language acquisition approach adopted, requiring educational interpreters to be competent in both areas to make effective real-time decisions.

## *5.2 Instructional aides*

Given the blurred line between the facilitation of communication and the facilitation of education in an educational context, it comes as no surprise that the interpreters at Pond Poet often found themselves assuming the additional responsibility of instructional aides, engaging in tasks like assessing student comprehension, offering supplementary instruction, and leading small-group sessions. Despite the absence of formal teaching credentials, they drew upon their diverse professional backgrounds, including prior experience in education, communication, and in some cases, their roles as parents, to support ELLs in accessing education. Notably, they often operated independently in these instructional roles, as explicit guidance from classroom teachers was frequently minimal.

Anna, a Portuguese–English interpreter with a background in communication, shared her frequent involvement in one-on-one teaching when the ELL encountered academic challenges (interview, 1 November 2022):



I was, unfortunately, put in Science and Math classes . . . Honestly, it wasn't me interpreting exactly what she was saying. It was me teaching that student as if I were a Portuguese teacher, as if I were just a regular teacher teaching him . . . So that's kind of what I had to do, especially in Math classes, where it's a little more abstract.

In this specific case, Anna believed there was a need to go beyond linguistic mediation for the ELL due to the subject's complexity. Consequently, her role extended to providing problem-solving assistance by reteaching the content in the learner's native language. This additional responsibility had become a significant part of her daily tasks, especially in subjects like science and math, which involve abstract concepts. Essentially, Anna saw herself as a bridge between the classroom teacher's instruction and the student's comprehension.

Additionally, Cora discussed her practice of fostering intellectual engagement in group activities during lab sessions (interview, 23 August 2022):

If we're working in groups, for example, in chemistry, we're doing a lab. I try for the students to be in charge, but if nobody steps up and things need to get done. I try to encourage them to at least read the directions. "Okay, let's see what you have to do. You need these materials. Go get them." I guess it helps that. I'm older and I have kids. So, you know, a little bit of mothering.

Clearly, Cora has reported that her role extended beyond that of a mere linguistic facilitator. She assumed the responsibilities of an academic facilitator, ensuring that ELLs and their peers stayed on track with the assignments.

The prevalence of tutoring practices among interpreters led us to explore in the interview how teachers perceived interpreters' shift toward instructional roles in classrooms at Pond Poet. Iris, an experienced elementary school teacher specializing in multilingual education, provided her perspective (interview, 17 August 2022):

Because of the nature of the job, you can't just be an interpreter. It's a mixed role, really . . . There are times where, for instance, if the classroom teacher is teaching

a particular topic, then the interpreter's job will be to interpret for the student. But oftentimes, this interpreter will go with the student off to the side, and do one to one, especially in Math. They are tutoring, not just interpreting and translating the language for the students. They're also instructing and facilitating the learning, and . . . that's why it's really, really good to have a tutor who is well-versed in the curriculum for that particular grade level. In that case, it would be easier if teachers could provide the materials.

From Iris' perspective, the term interpreter may not fully encompass the diverse range of responsibilities interpreters undertook in classrooms, given the nature of teaching and learning. She highlighted that the interpreters in her classrooms also offered instructional support, which required a diverse skill set beyond language proficiency and interpreting. Iris suggested that providing interpreters with necessary materials could facilitate their tutoring practices. Her understanding of interpreters' roles resonated with the historical association between interpreting and tutoring duties for ELLs at Pond Poet, which had previously been undertaken by LAU tutors.

Regarding this expanded role of interpreters, the program coordinator, Amelia, acknowledged that while interpreting class content for ELLs was interpreters' primary responsibility, they often assumed additional duties (interview, 10 September 2021):

So, the way we describe the role, the primary role, is to interpret the class content, make content accessible, and also help bridge cultural aspects of students learning, to integrate, to do school in the United States, basically. So that's kind of the basic level. And we know they end up in somewhat of a tutoring role where they are helping students to complete work and answer questions.

Amelia also mentioned an ongoing initiative to designate certain interpreters as interpreter paraprofessionals, formalizing their expanded responsibilities.

### 5.3 Advocates

The investigation also revealed a tendency among some teachers to delegate a portion of their teaching responsibilities to the interpreters working with ELLs. These teachers did not adjust their teaching materials and language to suit the needs and proficiency levels of ELLs, which goes against SEI principles. In response, some interpreters took on advocacy roles to ensure that ELLs received the necessary support and accommodations. They exerted efforts to seek teachers' attention, solicit guidance, and, in certain instances, request modifications to instructional materials and tasks. The subsequent excerpt features Cora's experiences in advocating for ELLs who appeared to be marginalized by their teacher (interview, 23 August 2022):

If I see a teacher like that [paying less attention to ELLs who are assigned with an interpreter], I tend to raise my hand. So the teacher comes, and I ask a question like, "One wants to know... how do you do this?" So the teacher remembers that the student is there.

In this case, Cora reported advocating for ELLs by actively participating in classroom activities and asking questions on their behalf, ensuring the teacher acknowledged the presence and needs of ELLs, thereby preventing their inadvertent neglect.

Similarly, Jan offered insights into the interpreter's potential role as an advocate. She specifically mentioned initiating dialogues with teachers when she found that the difficulty level of assignments was inconsistent with the learners' proficiency levels, and she would ask to adjust the assignments accordingly (interview, 25 July 2022):

Though I am aware that our responsibility is to relay what the teacher stated, it is not translation after all. So, especially at a later point, whenever I feel the need to modify an assignment, such as when I believe this task is beyond the ability of this student, I will consult the teacher to see if we could do only part of

it or something like that. If the teacher feels okay with it, we go with that, and if not, then I will need to put more effort.

Jan's efforts had a broader impact, transcending the boundary of addressing the learner's immediate needs with a specific assignment. Her approach contributed to a broader transformation in classroom educational practices, fostering an environment that recognized and respected diversity and promoted inclusion. This approach empowered teachers with insights into the conditions and requirements of ELLs, enabling them to maintain control over their classrooms while making informed decisions about instructional strategies and accommodations.

#### *5.4 Social and emotional coaches*

The interpreters also assumed a crucial role as social and emotional coaches for ELLs, contributing to their integration and adjustment within the school community and their new social environment. Cora, for instance, recognized the challenges some ELLs faced in connecting with peers due to language barriers. To tackle these challenges, she reported using sports as a means of promoting social interaction and foster friendships among ELLs and their fellow classmates (interview, 23 August 2022):

I encourage them to participate in sports, which can be very beneficial. In sports, they interact with students from various grades across the school, forming connections with their peers. Occasionally, we have students whose families are from El Salvador, but they've grown up here and don't speak Spanish at school, even though they understand it. They might not always interact with our ELL students. However, when they encounter each other in a sports setting, such as soccer practice, they realize, "Oh, you speak Spanish too." This creates a more natural and welcoming environment for building relationships.

Cora's approach provided ELLs with valuable opportunities to discover shared linguistic and cultural backgrounds among schoolmates, building relationships

via common experiences. This proactive strategy fostered a supportive atmosphere for ELLs, enabling them to casually meet and befriend peers, communicate directly, and independently develop relationships. Consequently, it reduced their dependency on interpreters for social interactions, promoting their growth as self-reliant communicators.

The value of interpreters as social facilitators, both within extracurricular activities and classroom settings, was not only recognized by ELLs but also appreciated by educators. Rebecca, a special-education teacher in a primary school, shared a personal anecdote that demonstrated the indispensable role of an interpreter in her son's building a meaningful friendship with another student, which originated from a shared passion for soccer and thrived with the interpreter's assistance (interview, 8 August 2022):

So, there was one year when a boy came from Cape Verde, and he spoke Portuguese, and no English at all, but he was good at soccer and my son loves soccer, and so they used to play soccer out at recess. But then when they were in the classroom, they couldn't really talk. But the interpreter just did such a good job of helping them get to know each other and she was really good at letting them talk to each other, while she stayed back there, but then she would interject to help when needed, so they were really connecting.

Rebecca's account underscores the interpreters' proficiency in deploying strategies for fostering the social inclusion of ELLs, demonstrating their strong capability of adjusting their level of involvement to suit specific contextual nuances and circumstances.

Moreover, interpreters like Anthony took it upon themselves to provide linguistic guidance to ELLs during their social interactions, promoting appropriate language usage within the school context. When they observed ELLs using inappropriate language, they intervened, as Anthony explained (interview, 1 October 2021):

Their grammar is usually slang and they speak in this not very formal way, not everyone. So they'll use some language that I think is inappropriate. And I will always tell them, "You know, you don't refer to young women with that word." I don't know if

they appreciate it, but they're a little surprised that we think it's wrong . . . We have to sort of step in. We've never been told to do this or that. But I think, as human beings, you have to be able to say, "If you do use this word, you're gonna get in trouble someday."

Anthony's words revealed his awareness of the intricate dynamics of communication and interaction within the school environment, particularly the potential repercussions of linguistic inappropriateness stemming from ELLs' unfamiliarity. His interventions served as a protective measure, mitigating the risk of adverse experiences and unintended consequences in ELLs' social life, as well as those who interacted with ELLs. Anthony thus played a pivotal part in helping ELLs understand and adapt to the unique discourse norms of the school. Consequently, he enhanced their awareness of appropriate language usage in their daily lives, fostering their social inclusion and recognition within the unfamiliar educational setting.

Furthermore, ELLs, as a marginalized group, often encounter distinctive challenges in shaping their identities within new environments, easily giving rise to feelings of exclusion and even interpersonal conflicts. Given that the interpreters primarily served as language facilitators, it is not surprising that some interpreters occasionally found themselves entangled in mediating conflicts involving ELLs and their peers, particularly within secondary school settings. Aline recounted her experiences in this context (interview, 28 July 2022):

Middle school kids who already have an understanding of the cultural differences are trying to figure out their social life and asserting themselves, and they are super concerned with fitting in and being liked and school dynamics . . . For me, it was really hard to work with the high school and deal with all of the bullying. Even though it's not our job to be dealing with that, it's also impossible not to because sometimes we're even helping translate.

Aline's statement illustrated the unique characteristics of K–12 educational settings, where younger learners are in the process of developing their worldviews. In the absence of more multilingual and multicultural guidance that

promotes openness and inclusivity, certain students may develop immature and insensitive attitudes toward differences. This, in turn, could lead ELLs to feel like outsiders due to these less comprehensive and inclusive worldviews. The unique dynamics, rooted in beliefs and perspectives, rather than language gaps, made the task of interpreting within educational spaces particularly challenging. Aline commented further (interview, 28 July 2022):

Again, it's the ethics you don't filter out, you don't say, "Oh that's bullying, I'm not going to translate it." But also, you're the adult, and you have to take a stance toward all the other kids as well. You're not only an interpreter, you are an adult in a classroom. That's also a role that you're playing, so it's a lot of layers, definitely not your traditional interpreting job.

In this excerpt, Aline underscored the intricate role assumed by the interpreters, characterizing it as an "adult in the classroom." The role necessitated skillfully maintaining a delicate balance between faithfully conveying all forms of communication and a commitment to safeguard the well-being of ELLs. The dual responsibilities of accurately interpreting interactions and addressing peer relationship issues to create a safe classroom environment for ELLs often put the interpreters into nuanced ethical dilemmas. They had to face a continual process of decision-making, weighing the choice between filtering out specific inappropriate language or confronting it directly. Each decision carried implications that necessitated a careful assessment of the potential consequences and their impact on the students involved.

### *5.5 Motivations for interpreters actively assuming multiple roles*

The motivations driving interpreters actively assuming multiple roles in their service for ELLs at Pond Poet can be illuminated through Anna's personal journey and perspective. Anna's experiences as an ELL in an unfamiliar environment, where she had to learn English solely through attending school, deeply influenced her outlook and instilled in her a profound empathy for ELLs. Empathy has already

been highlighted as a crucial factor for interpreted-mediated interactions in community settings in general (Santamaría Ciordia 2022). In Anna's case, empathy fueled her desire to provide assistance and take on additional responsibilities in her work as an educational interpreter (interview, 1 November 2022):

You're usually not just doing the things in the job description, because you want to be helpful, and at least for me, I feel a compassion toward these kids like I know, as a kid who grew up with only Portuguese, and then having to learn English just from going to school. I know how hard it is, how lonely it is not knowing the language of the other person, and how I am going to advocate for myself. So you have actual compassion, and I'll do anything because, at least for me, I want these kids to have what I didn't have.

In essence, Anna perceived her role as an opportunity to make a positive impact on the lives of ELLs by providing them with the support she wished she had during her own language-learning journey. As previous research indicates, interpreters frequently encounter students who are frustrated, intimidated, and lacking in self-advocacy skills, and educational interpreting often involves dealing with situations where ELLs are denied access to education and communication (Winston 2015). Anna had deep sympathy for ELLs and hoped to extend help through the interpreting position. Her story exemplifies how personal experiences and empathy motivate interpreters to assume diverse roles in their service to ELLs.

Moreover, Anthony highlighted that the enduring and substantial impact that interpreters could have on learners when they actively contribute to the holistic development of ELLs motivated him to extend his role beyond traditional boundaries. He articulated his perspective as follows (interview, 1 October 2021):

We have to be more than just interpreters. You have to just accept the whole person. It's not just, okay, the bell's gone, then that's it, you've done your job. It really keeps going. And they'll come to you in the middle of the hallway, and they'll greet you. It's a very human relationship that develops if it goes well.

As discussed earlier, the challenges faced by ELLs in adapting to a new school environment go beyond academics. Anthony was aware of the importance of



understanding ELLs' unique needs, challenges, and experiences, providing them with comprehensive support, and embracing them as complete individuals, believing that a student's educational experience extended beyond the classroom. His deep understanding of the potential impact interpreters could have on ELLs motivated him to assume multiple responsibilities. Aline similarly held the conviction that educational interpreters were not limited to the role of a mere interpreter. Instead, she saw them as adults within the classroom who could shoulder more significant responsibilities and make a more substantial impact on the students they served, extending their influence even beyond the classroom.

In this educational setting, interpreters often built enduring relationships with ELLs since they typically worked with the same learners throughout an entire school year, until these students were reevaluated on their ELP a year later. Over this extended period, the interpreters consistently observed and followed the educational and social growth of these students, strengthening their connections and trust with the learners. This practice reinforced the interpreters' role as more than just language facilitators; they became dedicated advocates for the holistic well-being of ELLs.

## **6. Conclusions: Reconceptualizing the role of educational interpreters in the classroom for ELLs**

### *6.1 The reality of interpreters' multiple roles*

The role of interpreters in community interpreting is highly heterogeneous, primarily driven by institutional needs. Moreover, the intricate interplay of stakeholder requirements, budget limitations, and legal parameters adds complexity to the utilization of interpreters in each particular context (Rudvin 2007). In educational settings, interpreters occupy a unique and pivotal position, given that they are often the sole individuals sharing a language with ELLs (Underwood 2021). Winston's (2015) research evidences that ELLs frequently relied on interpreters for

essential academic assistance when navigating unfamiliar academic environments. Similarly, Fitzmaurice (2021) underscores the indispensable role interpreters played in bridging significant resource gaps for ELLs in the absence of formal support structures.

The findings of this study align with and substantiate these existing insights. At Pond Poet, the surge of ELLs has created a compelling demand for individuals who can support them linguistically, academically, and socio-emotionally. Also, the school district holds a legal obligation to ensure their equitable access to education. Although the coordinator and teachers may not explicitly assign the responsibility for the education of ELLs to interpreters, it occurred sometimes due to teachers being overwhelmed with their existing duties. Additionally, some interpreters voluntarily took on the responsibilities, driven by their empathy toward learners. Given the absence of other readily available bilingual staff who could fulfill this gap, along with the unique nature of interpreting in educational settings where language and education access are deeply intertwined, the interpreters usually performed a multitude of responsibilities, formally or informally assigned to them.

### *6.2 Reconceptualizing the task of interpreting and the role of interpreters*

The expanded roles of interpreters at Pond Poet necessitate a comprehensive reevaluation and reconceptualization of their responsibilities within K–12 classrooms. This reconceptualization should extend to education and training protocols, qualification, and compensation policies, as well as the social and professional status associated with interpreters.

First, it should be recognized that the interpreters at Pond Poet primarily operated as bilingual educational paraprofessionals. When interpreting alone seemed insufficient to meet students' needs, many interpreters engaged in tutoring ELLs. Given the unique nature of interpreting in classroom settings, tutoring should be reframed as an interdependent activity rather than an additional duty beyond interpreting (Caruso & Williams Woolley 2008; Brimm 2021). Therefore, to enhance interpreters' efforts in supporting ELLs academically, a collaborative

and strategic approach is recommended. Establishing teams dedicated to ELL education, comprising homeroom teachers, ESL teachers, interpreters, and other supporting staff, is fundamental to this approach. The approach aims to optimize interpreters' capabilities in multicultural and multilingual communication, ensure the consistent implementation of SEI practices, and reinforce the central role of teachers in ELL education.

Interpreters should be encouraged to attend training in bilingual education and SEI, enabling them to collaboratively work with teachers in delivering SEI and supporting the translanguaging practices of ELLs. Within the educational teams, a co-teaching model could be adopted, allowing interpreters to leverage their deep understanding of the learners to enhance accessibility and customize education for ELLs, under teacher guidance.

Collaboration within the team should extend to interpreters sharing progress updates on ELLs with homeroom teachers and participating in evaluating SEI implementation effectiveness for ELLs. Teachers should share curriculum and agenda details ahead of time to allow interpreters to familiarize themselves with the curriculum and identify areas suitable for ELLs.

Beyond their interpreter role, some interpreters extended their practices to encompass tasks like social coaching, cultural mediation, and advocacy for ELLs, indicating their potential for a designated role as bilingual counselors. Hence, recognizing the importance of counseling in the experience of ELLs is crucial. Targeted training for some interpreters to formalize their role as bilingual counselors is recommended, empowering them to address the social, emotional, and psychological needs of ELLs more effectively. Collaboration with the counseling department could further amplify their impact.

### *6.3 Reevaluating interpreter training and qualification*

As we reassess the evolving role of interpreters within educational environments, there is an urgent need to critically evaluate interpreter training programs and redefine their essential skill sets. Pre-service training programs should be tailored to equip interpreters with competencies specifically geared

toward navigating the multifaceted challenges of educational settings. This specialized training should prioritize situational relevance within educational contexts, enabling interpreters to adeptly address challenges, conceptualize tasks, assess their capabilities, and make informed decisions during interpreted interactions (Witter–Merithew & Nicodemus 2012).

For interpreters seeking to formalize their roles as bilingual paraprofessionals, it is imperative to acquire additional training in key areas such as pedagogy, second language acquisition, classroom management, legal and ethical guidelines, special education, collaboration, communication, educational technology, observation techniques, and reporting procedures. Proficiency in academic standards and the curriculum is also essential for effectively assessing ELLs' progress and tailoring support strategies accordingly. Moreover, interpreters aspiring to serve as bilingual counselors may acquire expertise in counseling techniques, psychological assessment, family dynamics, and trauma-informed care.

Furthermore, there is a pressing need to reevaluate the qualification standards for interpreters. Existing job descriptions at Pond Poet lacked specificity regarding their duties and qualifications. Thus, a revision of the job postings is necessary. This revision should involve consultation with relevant stakeholders, including interpreters, educators, administrators, and representatives from the ELL community, to ensure that the qualifications accurately reflect the demands of the position and the needs of the students they serve. Additionally, establishing standardized qualification requirements can promote consistency in the quality of interpreting services.

Educators responsible for training interpreters should also be encouraged to align their programs with the current trends and day-to-day practices observed within classrooms. A more robust and relevant training system can better equip interpreters for their role and contribute to the professionalization of this field.

#### *6.4 Moving toward culturally responsive interpreting*

Embracing a revised discourse on educational interpreters and the professionalization of their role holds the potential to empower the practitioners

to become catalysts for meaningful conversations within school communities. By challenging mainstream monolingual ideologies, interpreters' linguistic and cultural competence can become invaluable assets to the entire school community. This paradigm shift will occur when administrators and teachers reframe their perspective, viewing interpreters not solely as aids for language, but as opportunities to integrate concepts of multiculturalism and diversity into classrooms. This shift in perspective can lead to a deeper understanding of language access and education rights in the school community, fostering a more nuanced approach to addressing the needs of ELLs. To facilitate these transformative changes and ensure the delivery of high-quality services to ELLs in compliance with legal requirements, it would be beneficial for the school district to explore funding opportunities at the local, state, and federal levels.

Overall, the interpreters at Pond Poet demonstrated a unique blend of linguistic and cultural competencies, along with experiences in related fields such as education, communication, and psychology. This combination made them valuable and rare resources within Pond Poet's educational landscape. As their roles continue to evolve, there is a pressing need for a paradigm shift that acknowledges interpreters as professionals entitled to comprehensive training and education to effectively fulfill their expanding responsibilities and elevate the standard of language access services. Furthermore, advocating for a culturally responsive approach to interpreting promotes more equitable and inclusive institutional structures.

### *6.5 Implications*

While the findings of this study may be specific to Pond Poet's unique characteristics and the operational aspects of its educational interpreting service, they offer valuable insights into interpreting, language access, and ELL education. Therefore, although generalizability to other educational settings may be limited, this study could stimulate further research and the development of practices aimed at professionalizing interpreters and safeguarding the rights of ELLs.

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