Facts about Signing Exact English

The purpose of this paper is to explain why an interpreter using Signing Exact English (SEE) cannot be tested without the exam containing features of American Sign Language (ASL).

ASL is the language of the deaf community. It is a language separate from English with its own grammar and syntax. In contrast, SEE is a visual representation of English; not a separate language. "Signing Exact English is a sign language system that represents literal English…SEE modifies and supplements the vocabulary of ASL…" ("The SEE Center", 1973-2011, para. 9). SEE is an educational methodology used primarily in some public school systems but is rarely used by deaf adults.

Just as one cannot evaluate the English fluency of an English Language Learner by using a test that does not include English grammar such as verbs, nouns, etc., one cannot evaluate the fluency of a SEE interpreter without including the components that give the words meaning. In fact, no such test exists.

The developers of SEE based their signing system upon ASL therefore; ASL is the foundation of SEE. Their goal was to "…stay as close as possible to signs and principles or features used in ASL, while at the same time representing English as clearly and completely as possible" (Gustason, Pfetzing, and Zawolkow, 1980, p. vii). There are several features of ASL that clarify meaning and that should be present in any SEE interpretation. For example, the placement of the sign gives meaning to the words being conveyed. The sign for "pain" is made near the head when referring to a person with a headache or near the stomach when referring to a person with a stomachache. This is just one example of the many ASL features a SEE interpreter must incorporate into his or her signing to make the message clear.

The Educational Interpreter Performance Assessment (EIPA) is designed to evaluate the skills of interpreters who work in elementary and secondary school classroom settings ("Educational Interpreter", n.d., para. 1). Brenda Schick, Ph.D. co-authored the EIPA exam and when asked if it were possible to eliminate features of ASL from a SEE interpretation she stated, "…it would be linguistically impossible to not borrow some aspects of ASL into SEE. It [SEE] is incomprehensible without sign prosody, space, facial expression, etc. The EIPA requires these aspects in SEE interpretation…There are many aspects of meaning conveyed by the voice and these need to be represented in some way in visual languages" (B. Schick, personal communication, May 9, 2011). Prosody is defined as "the patterns of stress and intonation in a language" (Prosody, n.d., para. 9). Vocal intonations need to be shown in a visual way by any interpreter, whether using ASL or SEE. Without incorporating ASL features into a SEE interpretation, the signs become just a string of meaningless words.

References

Educational Interpreter Performance Assessment. (n.d.). *Classroom Interpreting*. Retrieved September 8, 2011, from
    http://classroominterpreting.org/EIPA/performance/index.asp

Gustason, G., Pfetzing, D., & Zawolkow, E. (1980). *Signing exact English.* Los Alamitos, CA: Modern Signs Press, Inc.

Prosody. (n.d.). *Collins English Dictionary - Complete & Unabridged 10th Edition*. Retrieved September 12, 2011, from Dictionary.com website:
    http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/prosody

The S.E.E. Center. (1973-2011). *What is Signing Exact English?* Retrieved November 3, 2011, from http://www.seecenter.org/