

The Necessary of Offering Sign Language Interpretation Programs in China

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Keywords: Sign Language Interpretation Programs, the Deaf, Hearing-Impaired People, China

Abstract: This paper elaborates the necessity of offering sign language interpretation program from the perspectives of the language status of sign language, the rights of the deaf, the needs of the deaf and the situation of sign language interpretation in China. It is hoped that the life of the deaf or hearing-impaired people can be improved with the help of more professional sign language interpreters, while paving the way for the professionalization of sign language interpretation.

1. Introduction

In China, there are over 20.57 million deaf or hearing-impaired people, but a marked discrepancy between the actual recruitment of and the apparent need for sign language interpreters stands out and the gap between the “supply” and “demand” is as high as 95%.

A great many of deaf or hearing-impaired people are facing overwhelming communication problems, which are either solved through the help of their family members, friends, teachers or acquaintances or simply left unsolved. Usually, people who can help are not always available when the deaf need help since the former have to work and could not accompany the deaf at every moment. In this case, the deaf are still facing many communication problems.

Since sign language interpretation is just in its infancy in China, measures should be taken to pave the way for its development and create favorable conditions. Now, there are only one university and two colleges offering sign language interpretation major in China, given this, the top priority should be offering such sign language interpretation programs. And the reasons could be clarified as follows:

2. The Necessary of Offering Sign Language Interpretation Programs in China

2.1 To Accelerate the Legal Recognition of Language Status of Sign Language in China

Sign language had long been treated as an unsophisticated and imperfect communication system manifesting incomplete linguistic features. It was not until 1960 when William Stokoe, father of American Sign Language (ASL) Linguistics published his revolutionary work *Sign Language Structure: An Outline of the Visual Communication Systems of the American Deaf* that sign language was proved and accepted by many as a natural language of mankind.

In China, the language status of sign language is neither officially confirmed nor denied. *The Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities* issued by the 61th UN General Assembly in 2006 explicitly states that language contains sign language, spoken language as well as other forms of non-spoken languages. Like everyone else, the specific culture and language of people with disabilities should be recognized and supported. As a contracting party to this international convention, China has no reservation about this, which suggests that China agrees on all the chapters including the language status of sign language.

Owing to limited contact and unacquaintance with the deaf, government officials are mainly able to work on something within their sights and knowledge and little time or chance could be given to them to learn something about sign language. The offering of sign language interpretation programs will be helpful in spreading knowledge of sign language interpretation as well as sign language. This would help the general public including the government gain a better understanding of this occupation and consider its nature from a more professional perspective. It is thus helpful in clarifying the language status of sign language and quickening its official confirmation by the

government. Sign language interpretation program, for its part, would urge more experts to take a look at the issue of language status of sign language again.

As for the deaf or hearing-impaired people, due to communication problems together with the lack of attention and care from the general public as well as the difficulty to find a job, most of the deaf individuals feel it extremely hard to integrate into the society and it makes them believe that they are in a marginalized group and most of them become self-abased. It leads to a reality that most of the deaf or hearing-impaired people have accommodated themselves to minimum communication with the hearing world and few can be found asking help from the government to recognize the language status of their unique language and to provide sign language interpreters for them. Suppose sign language interpretation programs are offered extensively, more sign language interpreters would be produced and more attention would be given to the deaf community. With more people caring about and helping them, the deaf would feel less self-abased and regard themselves on an equal basis with the normal people. Gradually, they would become confident and regard sign language interpretation a basic right and sign language a legal language. And when the language status of sign language could not be guaranteed, they are likely to turn to the government for help. Thus, the offering of sign language interpretation program would bring “helpers” to the deaf community, making them more confident and encouraging them to ask for help from the government concerning the official recognition of their unique language.

Thus, only when the deaf or hearing-impaired people receive enough help and care, are these special groups likely to be encouraged and become confident, hence bravely request the general public to recognize their language as equal as the language being used now.

2.2 To Guarantee Rights of the Deaf or Hearing-Impaired People

The *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (CRPD), an extraordinary work aiming at securing people with disabilities the same human rights as everyone else, defines clearly that language includes spoken and signed languages (signed language also refers to sign language) as well as other forms of none spoken languages (Article 2). It suggests that the right to using sign language is a fundamental human right of the deaf or hearing-impaired people since “language rights” is granted to everyone. CRPD requires its states parties to accept and facilitate the use of sign language (Article 21b), claiming that states parties shall take appropriate measures to provide forms of live assistance and intermediaries, including guides, readers and professional sign language interpreters to facilitate accessibility to building and other facilities open to the public (Article 9.2e). Besides, Article 9 pronounces that states parties shall provide training for stakeholders on accessibility issues facing persons with disabilities (Article 9.2c).

China is a developing country, the second largest economy in the world, and a contracting party of the United Nations. Both its own national condition and the status of being a member of UN require it to accept, recognize and follow the chapters of CRPD in promoting linguistic and other human rights of the deaf. However, a survey of 86 deaf conducted by the author reveals that nearly none of the respondents know the regulations of the above mentioned Articles, not to mention the implementation of them.

The fact that only very few people could use sign language in China greatly reduces the communication between the deaf and normal people, and it also limits the use of sign language and the deaf or hearing-impaired people are deprived of their “language rights” in a certain sense. In view of this, the provision of sign language interpretation programs will definitely attract more people to learn sign language and increase the frequency sign language being used, which may occur among sign language learners or among the deaf and sign language learners. With more communication taking place via sign language, the basic human right of the deaf to use sign language with less limitation could be guaranteed and the regulation in Article 21 could be implemented.

As Article 9.2c in CRPD demonstrates, training should be provided to sign language interpreters to guarantee the accessibility of the deaf to everything they need, thus sign language interpretation programs should be offered at various levels. Given the current situation in China, sign language

interpretation is a newly emerged occupation. Some kinds of interpreter training do exist, but their quality, length or the scope varies greatly, from a one month course in learning some basic signs to a college-level major running three years. In this case, training, especially professional training at university level should be offered to implement Article 9.2c of CRPD and guarantee the right of deaf or hearing-impaired people to accessibility by providing training for their stakeholders.

2.3 To Meet the Demands of Large Numbers of Hearing-Impaired People

As mentioned earlier, more than 20 million deaf or hearing impaired people in China need the help of people who can use sign language for most of their day-to-day interactions with the hearing world.

The survey of 86 deaf or hearing-impaired people conducted by the author finds that 34 (40.5%) respondents are facing a great many communication problems and 48 (56%) rate the problems they confront as “many”. The survey also indicates that these problems occur nearly in every aspect of their lives and take place in the classroom, on the bus or even in the street, etc. Of the 86 deaf or hearing-impaired respondents included in the survey, 56 (65%) solve the communication problems with the help of the family members or friends, 21 (25%) deal with the problems by themselves and 8 (10%) simply leave the problems unsettled. Among the 21 respondents who handle the communication problems independently, 14 (70%) deal with these problems by way of editing short messages and then showing to other people. As for the communication results, 6 of these 21 respondents (29%) regard the communication as a little bit difficult, yet could still achieve the goal of communication, 8 (38.8%) define their independent communication as difficult and could be accomplished through great effort, 7 (32.2%) say that they could hardly communicate with others. Faced with this situation, 9 of those 21 respondents (42%) choose to go out with people who can use sign language and 12 (55.5%) admit that they try not to go out and avoid direct contact with the outside world. Thus, conclusion could be drawn that the deaf are facing great communication problems and they could not communicate well with others if no help is given.

Besides, the author finds a video clip made during “The Second Summer Camp of the Deaf” organized by Changchun University from a blog of a deaf person. Ten deaf interviewees selected as representatives can be found narrating the biggest problems in their lives as well as hopes of the deaf community (http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_6871bccd0100eepk.html). In this video clip which lasts 21 minutes, the most frequently signed words by the deaf representatives are sign language interpreters, work, education and discrimination.

More than half of the interviewees mention the issue of education. Poor sign language skills of the teachers and the lack of professional sign language interpreters aiding the teaching are preventing them from smoothly comprehending the knowledge being taught. Even if sign language interpreting service is provided in some schools, they sometimes could not catch up with the teachers’ speed or could not understand the teaching content. Hence pauses for a long time and unintelligible sign languages are quite common.

Many of the interviewees cite their personal experience. One girl accounts her experience of seeking help from the normal that when she was lost on the way to hospital and asked the way from passers-by, most of whom were either impatient to wait for her to finish the requiring or just roughly pointed to a general direction without giving the detailed information, and when she arrived at the hospital, she found it horribly difficult to communicate with the doctors. Similar experiences exist in many aspects of their lives. Thus, they hope sign language interpreters could be provided in public places such as the hospital, the bank, the court, the insurance company or even the market.

Actually, the real needs of the deaf or hearing-impaired people are far beyond the above mentioned examples and all problems arise from inefficient communication. Therefore, the offering of sign language interpretation programs would definitely facilitate the communication. The situation of the deaf must be improved and their needs will be better met.

2.4 To Improve the Backwardness of Sign Language Interpretation in China

Sign language interpretation has a history of about 40 years. After the establishment of RID in 1964, it began to develop in U.S, the front runner in this field, other countries spotted and

conducted researches into this field shortly after. In China, the first academic paper mentioning “sign language interpretation” appeared in 2001, which suggests that China is a late-comer.

When researchers in other countries were discussing interpretation occasions, no Chinese was involved. When they were talking about the quality and professionalization, still no Chinese was involved. When they were doing researches on qualification assessment and error analysis, China began to study sign language glove for recognizing sign language and called on the training of sign language interpreters. Now when other countries are considering how to perfect their teaching, employment and (re)accreditation system, China starts to learn from those countries about how to open up this new field.

The majority of Auslan (Australian sign language) interpreters get most of their regular work in the educational setting, although their status as interpreters is not always recognized (Ozolins & Bridge, 1999). In U.S, full-time sign language interpreters are also assigned in deaf schools or ordinary schools accepting deaf students. Take Rochester Institute of Technology as an example, altogether 122 full-time sign language interpreters are distributed into 121 majors, providing classroom sign language interpreting as well as counseling service. While in China, according to a survey done by Zhang Ningsheng and his team members that asks 9 schools admitting deaf students whether they have sign language interpreters to aid the teaching, result shows that the vast majority of the respondents have no sign language interpreters.

In U.S., sign language interpretation major is provided in more than 130 colleges and universities (Meng, 2010), offering courses at different levels. In Australia, many training courses are available at college-level and a postgraduate training program offering Postgraduate Diploma in Auslan/English Interpreting has been started in Language Institute of Macquarie University. Since both of the above two countries admit the language identity of sign language, their training of sign language interpreters is put within translation and interpretation training programs. In China, however, only one university and two colleges are offering college-level professional training, which has been called special education major alternatively and has nothing to do with translation or interpretation.

What's more, both U.S. and Australia have complete accreditation system, certification maintenance or reaccreditation system which means the certification issued by the authority is only valid for a finite period and the interpreters must collect evidence to show that they are still practicing. It is a good way to keep improving the interpreters' ability. In China, similar systems could not be found even in the official guide - *National Professional Standard of Sign Language Interpreter (pilot edition)* which took effect in 2008. After its first printing in 2009, no further editions have been found and the only and pilot edition is still in use now. More than three years after its publication, no modification or improvement have been made up till now. Besides, when consulting with the teacher of Xi'an No.2 School for the Deaf-mutes, the author obtains information that though *National Professional Standard of Sign Language Interpreter (pilot edition)* has already been issued, the corresponding proficiency test has never been held in a great many provinces in China, including Shaanxi Province, and the people serving as sign language interpreters are not sign language interpreters in true sense. They are deaf school teachers occasionally being invited to serve as sign language interpreters. Even sign language interpreters of CCTV NEWS (Chinese channel) are all teachers from Beijing No.4 School for the Deaf instead of professional sign language interpreters. In the survey conducted by the author involving 86 deaf or hearing-impaired people, when being asked about whether they know sign language interpretation is a profession, 80 (93%) respondents say they do. When answering whether they have received service from sign language interpreters, only 4 (5.2%) admit so and the rest 82 (94.8%) choose the option of receiving help of sign language interpretation provided by their family members, friends or even teachers. What is worth mentioning is that the so-called sign language interpreters by the only 4 respondents might not be professional sign language interpreters, maybe the interpreters in the eyes of these 4 respondents are also deaf school teachers.

3. Conclusion

From what has been talked above, it is clear that sign language interpretation programs should be provided for the sake of the language status of sign language, for the sake of the rights and demands of hearing-impaired people, as well as for the sake of backwardness of China in this area.

Acknowledgement

The study was financially supported by Xianyang Fu Brick Tea under the Belt and Road Initiative (2017k02-103)

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