

Visual Language Interpreters Communicating with the Deaf

Four employees who are really passionate about their work agreed to talk to us about the fascinating world of Québec sign language. The Langue des signes du Québec (LSQ) is used by the deaf and the hearing impaired. Sign language is not a code, it is a language recognized by linguists with its own vocabulary and grammar rules.

How do you become a visual language interpreter? Louise Schmidt and Diane Rodrigue are of the old school and learned on the job. Julie Boucher and Line Larivière, following the official recognition of the language in 1980 in Québec, were able to take courses at l'Institut Raymond-Dewar and earn a visual interpreters' certificate at UQAM, before they began working at Cégep du Vieux-Montréal.

Regardless of their training or experience, interpreters, mainly women, are constantly learning and evolving. Not only are they required to master the content of the courses they translate for deaf students, they must also deliver consistent mental effort which requires a high level of concentration.

To communicate information, the interpreter must first understand the meaning of the message, which means that he or she is always a bit behind the teacher. When the student wishes to intervene, the interpreter must also translate the LSQ message into French.

The intellectual challenges are many in this profession, but interpreters help each other a great deal and consult each other when they face a challenge. How do they interpret new words, highly abstract concepts, English terms or a play on words? For example, the term *e-mail* has a new sign because it is used so frequently. The sign used for the term DNA represents a spiral of genes. In a discussion about phenomenology, the interpreter has to convey the meaning of the concept. For a figurative expression such as "passer du coq à l'âne," the interpreter conveys the underlying idea.

Things become more complicated when English words crop up. Since language is an integral part of culture, there are as many sign languages as languages. Deaf English speakers learn American Sign Language (ASL) and are placed with an English-speaking teacher. They receive English-language interpretation services using ASL. In some cases, the interpreter must master French, English, LSQ and ASL.

In addition to mastering subjects, interpreters must also adapt to the flow of speech and the voice tone of teachers and the students who participate in class. Sometimes, this becomes a demanding challenge as the interpreter must convey the maximum information to the student regardless of misspeaking, mistakes in French, Anglicisms, hesitations, etc. Homonyms

can also be a challenge. An interpreter used the example of distinguishing between two terms such as *romantique* and *Rome antique*. The profession of interpreter requires a solid cultural background and excellent mental ability.

Visual interpreting also demands a great deal of physical effort because the upper limbs of the body are overused in comparison with the rest of the body. The union and the employer of the CVM have set up an occupational health and safety committee because of the frequency of injuries in the profession. The committee introduced a warm-up and stretching program and asked for ergonomic chairs to reduce the risk of injuries and allow interpreters to take mini-breaks during their sessions.

Visual interpreters speak with their bodies and must also convey emotion. If in a psychology course, for instance, the discussion is about a couple experiencing conflict, the interpreter must interpret the situation a little bit like an actor, to convey the emotional conflict. But if the teacher's speech is dull and monotonous, the interpreter's delivery will be as well.

In a nutshell, the profession of visual language interpreter is highly demanding, mentally and physically. But after having talked to people who are passionate about their work, it is clear that thanks to these professionals, higher education has become accessible to the deaf and hearing impaired.

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PHOTOS: JEAN-FRANÇOIS LEBLANC



Sign language is a recognized language.