

Interpreting into Plain Language: Accessibility of On-site Courses for People with Cognitive Impairments

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Abstract

This paper aims to show a way to eliminate or, at least, to diminish barriers to higher education for people with cognitive impairments. By 2016, only 3 persons with Down syndrome had obtained a university degree. To really include this population group in educational, professional and social life, it is necessary to offer suitable communication aids, such as plain language, simultaneously delivered, not only in the form (ex post) of written translations. It is therefore necessary to develop a new variant of interpreting: simultaneous interpreting into plain language. This article first shows existing non-scientific approaches, but also the challenges and possible further development.

1 Introduction

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with disabilities (CRPD) of December 13th 2006 was opened for signature on March 30th 2007 and has been ratified by 177 Nations (United Nations, undated). This Convention also should smooth the way to (higher) education for persons with cognitive impairments (United Nations. Undated). While a wide range of measures to support people with reduced mobility and sensory impairments have already been implemented, people with cognitive impairments still seem to have extremely limited access to universities.

Meanwhile, it has been shown that people with cognitive impairments, especially persons with Down syndrome, have a solid capability for learning and can reach good levels of education, if they have the opportunity. They just have learning difficulties and/or difficulties in decoding complex and abstract processes of

thinking and very often have an IQ within the normal range of 70 to 130 (Down Syndrom Regensburg, undated).

The main problem seems to be that persons with cognitive impairments need a special way of communicating in order to be able to participate in secondary and higher education along with other students.

Pablo Pineda, the first European with Down syndrome to have graduated from university, says that his learning ability is reduced by approximately 30% (Welt 2009).

So, communication aids such as information in plain language persons could be needed by persons with Down syndrome, which, up to date, is almost only – if at all – available in written texts (translations).

In Germany, a lot of efforts are being made in order to bring people with learning difficulties on the so-called “first labor market” and not let them spend their lives in sheltered workshops. Education is the best way to achieve that, as was pointed out in several national and international conferences recently, such as the European Conference on inclusion “Inklusion – Wege in Gute Arbeit” (Inclusion - ways to good jobs) in Berlin at the beginning of September 2018.

In order to take part in face-to-face courses in real-time, people with learning difficulties would rather need real-time communication in plain language, which makes simultaneous interpreting necessary.

2 Current Situation

Currently, there is an increasing demand for simultaneous interpreting into plain language, a discipline that, according to university curricula, does not even exist.

While translation from standard into plain language has been known since 1974 in the USA (People First, undated) and spilled over to

Germany in the 1990s, interpreting from standard into plain language is still widely unknown.

Anne Leichtfuss, an online-editing professional, wrote her BA thesis on Plain Language on the Internet. She had previously worked as a translator into Plain Language, when – in 2013 – she was asked whether it would be possible to offer simultaneous interpreting for persons with cognitive impairments in order to achieve real inclusion.

So, she became the first (autodidactic) simultaneous interpreter for plain language, a service that apparently has been well received. As, being the only person offering this service, she had to work alone in the booth – unconceivable for professional conference interpreters – she started to offer several workshops to train other colleagues, which, due to the lack of professional expertise, including, but not limited to the use of interpreting strategies, is quite questionable.

The fact that only 3 of the participants (one of whom – the author – is an active professional conference interpreter, another is a master student of conference interpreting towards the completion of her studies) have started so far to offer simultaneous interpreting into plain language shows that there are enormous challenges to master and that this kind of workshops might not show the intended effects.

To date, no requests have been received from universities, but governments and other public institutions have ordered simultaneous interpreting into plain language, and there is an increasing demand for it.

3 Target groups

As outlined above, the main target group for simultaneous interpreting into plain language is persons with learning difficulties.

But also persons with a migratory background, or international students who are not 100% proficient in the country's or courses' language, could eventually benefit from plain language, which would not prevent them from improving their language skills, as plain language is supposed to be grammatically correct, but reduced in complexity.

Another possible target group (for speech-to-text interpreting into plain language) are deaf

persons, whose first language is sign language and who are not fluent in written or spoken languages.

4 Practical application in university settings

Different possible variants of interpreting can be taken into account:

4.1 Simultaneous Interpreting (SI)

The first choice, of course, would be simultaneous interpreting (speech-to-speech), being a “natural” setting. The best way to provide SI is using a booth for the interpreters and the corresponding transmission system. Of course, this is not easily provided, due to the high costs and not inconsiderable space requirements.

A tour guide system could be a solution for some kind of classes, where the lecture hall is big enough not to disturb the other students and the lecturer, and in addition, an induction system would need to be installed to make sure that the interpreters' auditory perception was good enough to deliver a good interpretation.

4.2 Speech-to-text interpreting (STTI)

Another possibility could be speech-to-text interpreting into plain language: For intra-lingual STTI, university settings are well known already – provided by speech-to-text interpreters in Germany, Austria and Switzerland in different settings (on-site, remote and hybrid forms) – and have proven to be technically feasible.

Of course, for STTI into plain language, such as for SI into plain language, there is no professional training available by now.

5 Challenges of SI and STTI into plain language and how to face them

The big difference between interlingual and standard to plain language interpreting is that it is not about transcoding from one language to another, but rather within a language from one variety to another.

According to the author's experience, there is a big great temptation to use the same words and similar syntactic constructions in the target text, when it is really all about avoiding repetitions that maintain a similar complexity and/or difficulties.

For plain language, the interpreter has to apply the rules for Plain Language – of course with the limitation of not having a control group in the same way as in the case of written translation that confirms comprehensibility – and needs to deliver the target text in real time, without time to try out different variants. Feedback on comprehensibility can only be obtained ex post. Furthermore, he or she has to explain contextually important “difficult” expressions; therefore, there will be additional text, not included in the source (speech).

This is even more complicated to handle, as the interpretation should be spoken slowly, in a steady rhythm, so as to be easy to understand.

The way the author attempts to face these challenges is mainly applying Danica Seleskovitch’s (2002) “theory of sense”: to hear, analyze, “deverbalize” and produce a new text without sticking to the source text. Although in SI, this theory has been criticized, in SI into plain language, it can be very helpful.

Even more challenging than SI into plain language is STTI into plain language, as the written target text must appear according to the rules of Plain Language – to give but one example, one sentence per line – and has to be monitored and corrected in case of typing, editing or recognition errors.

In consequence of the above stated, the high demands of SI and STTI into plain language require an appropriate interpreter training. Furthermore, little scientific research is available on this topic, which makes it difficult to develop such training.

6 Approach to teaching SI and STTI into plain language

SI into plain language is very challenging, as described above, but it could be a tool – if offered professionally – to meet UN CRPD’s requirements. Therefore, SI and STTI into plain language should be included in curricula of translation studies to train interpreters for this field of application.

There are two basic requirements: a deep knowledge of the different sets of rules for Plain Language – such as Forschungsstelle Hildesheim (Maaß 2015), Netzwerk Leichte Sprache (2013) and Capito – and a very good command of interpreting strategies and their correct application in SI and/or STTI.

It could be part of the curriculum for conference interpreting, which is the setting where SI into plain language is being used at present, or for community interpreting.

STTI is just at the very beginning of forming part of translation studies – with a handful of bachelor and master’s thesis and only one doctoral dissertation at the University of Vienna (Platter 2015) and another one in progress at London’s Roehampton University. STTI into plain language could therefore be an interesting topic to be developed within translation studies.

A lot of research is needed to establish SI and/or STTI within translation studies and consequently to offer professional services in this field to a wider public. One of the first steps could be a study on interpretation delivered into plain language and based on the findings originating from those studies to work on a standardization of SI into plain language.

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