EDUCATING "LANGUAGE HELPERS": SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETER EDUCATION IN JAPAN

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Abstract - Sign language interpreters facilitate communication between deaf and hearing people. Access to sign language interpretation is enshrined in law in Japan. The Law to Eliminate Discrimination against People with Disabilitiesenacted in 2016 legally obliges public organizations to remove barriers preventing disabled people from full participation in society. It calls for the provision of "reasonable accommodations" with the cabinet office listing "shuwa" (sign language) as an example. Skilled Japanese Sign Language (JSL) interpreters are required to ensure access for deaf and hard-of-hearing (DHH) Japanese citizens in a wide range of fields and arenas including education, law, sports, government, media, and healthcare. Despite significant improvements in interpreter education and dispatch, research indicates that the communication needs of DHH Japanese are still not being met. There is a network of factors that negatively affect securing interpretation, but a key factor is human resources: a lack of skilled JSL interpreters. However, little qualitative research has been conducted on the current situation of sign language interpreter education in Japan. This paper explores how sign language interpreter training is implemented and why and how identified gaps between sign language users' linguistic preferences and needs and the interpretation services being provided persist. It does so by drawing upon in-depth interviews with JSL interpreters, coordinators, and educators as well as participant observation in online and in-person sign language interpreter settings and ongoing research with DHH sign language users. The field's roots in volunteerism along with the absence of a rigorous national standardized curriculum are identified as key issues in sign language interpreter training programs in Japan.

Keywords - Sign Language, Education, Reasonable Accommodations, Deaf, Disability, Japan