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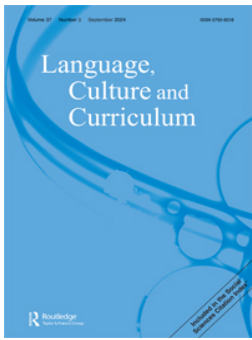
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## The burden of sustaining communication: communication breakdowns experienced by deaf students and their communication support workers in a further education college

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# The burden of sustaining communication: communication breakdowns experienced by deaf students and their communication support workers in a further education college

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## ABSTRACT

The educational inclusion of deaf students in England is usually interpreted as placement in mainstream settings alongside hearing students, creating unintended pressure for assimilation to the communicative needs of hearing people. In this context, it is deaf students and their communication support staff who are left to deal with communicative disparities found in educational settings. This ethnographic study explored episodes of communication breakdown in communicative interactions of 5 deaf college students in a further education college in Northern England. Analysis coded what was the source of breakdown, who noticed it, who repaired communication and what strategy was used. Findings were organised into three themes, reflecting how breakdowns were dealt with either by deaf students or their Communication Support Workers, or as a shared concern with teaching staff. Overall, deaf students were noted to deal with miscommunication through translanguaging, deploying their multilingual and multimodal repertoires to engage with multiple audiences and repair communication. Findings reflect how deaf students are overburdened with responsibility for ensuring communication is sustained, which opens further questions regarding the pressure to assimilate to hearing normative ways of communicating. Restricting deaf students' communication to English may limit their development as bi/multilinguals and their learning experiences.

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## Introduction

Inclusive education, initially focused on students with disabilities, has been expanded to address learning barriers for all students (Ainscow, 2007, 2024). Despite this broadened scope, the implementation of inclusive efforts may still inadvertently privilege a normative centre, requiring conformity from diverse populations (Graham & Slee, 2008). Consequently, the evolving concept of inclusion may lead to misunderstandings (Ainscow, 2024) while superficial agreements over its meaning could hide this controversy (Powers, 2002).

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This article will be focused on deaf students. The term 'deaf' will be privileged, considering how being deaf can be considered an intersection of influences, including identity and going beyond biological 'deafness' (Young & Temple, 2014). This is reflected in the way various Deaf cultures – with the capitalisation designating a distinct cultural affiliation (Ladd, 2003) – use 'deaf' as a marker of identity and belonging, as distinct from (and sometimes opposed to) hearing loss (Lane, 1995).

Under the rubrics of access and inclusion, the view of deaf individuals as disabled has been privileged along with mainstreaming, threatening the language rights of deaf Signed Language users (Murray et al., 2018; Rayman, 2009). The World Federation of the Deaf (2019) counters this by stating that 'inclusion is an experience, not a placement' (p. 3). They advocate for support in language and social development for deaf students, including studying in congregated spaces with sign language fluent peers and teachers (WFD, 2019).

When educational placement concerns for deaf students supersede language protection discussions, the responsibility for understanding educational content falls on deaf students and their interpreters (Snoddon & Murray, 2019). Despite technological interventions, deaf students in mainstream settings are often excluded from incidental learning and socialisation (Rayman, 2009; WFD, 2018). Consequently, linguistic hierarchies persist, with a majority language being the primary learning medium and pedagogies for deaf students relying on content translation (Murray et al., 2018; Snoddon & Murray, 2019).

This article posits that these classroom communication arrangements lead to epistemic injustices (Fricker, 2007), as deaf students must continually adjust to the communication needs of hearing individuals. This internal exclusion (Young, 2000) inadvertently shapes deaf students' development via microsialisation (Valsiner, 2014), compelling them to adopt hearing communication norms for mainstream participation. The present article therefore asks: To what extent are mainstream educational settings at college level reproducing these conditions of injustice for deaf students?

## Theoretical and empirical review

The next section will review the literature on communication of deaf students in college settings to assess how they are responding to the needs of Signed Language users. Translanguaging will be introduced to highlight the value of communication flexibility, and dialogical perspectives will further contextualise the discussions in issues of communicative (in)justices.

### *Communication flexibility and support use in deaf college students*

Deaf individuals communicate through various means, including Signed Languages, facial expressions, fingerspelling, and spoken/written words (Kusters, 2017; Swanwick, 2017). Recognising this, a translanguaging approach is promoted in deaf education (Swanwick, 2017), allowing individuals to use their full communication repertoire, transcending language boundaries (Canagarajah, 2011). This approach values bi/multilingual resources and aids in expressing bi/multilingual identities (Blackledge & Creese, 2014). In mixed hearing and deaf educational settings, communicative competences,

not just language ability, are linked to academic success (Antia et al., 2009). While literacy in a dominant language like English is crucial for post-secondary education enrolment, communication flexibility, pragmatic skills, and effective use of provided adjustments are key to college success (Convertino et al., 2009; Paul et al., 2020; Powell et al., 2014).

Deaf students' success in college hinges on flexible communication and pragmatic skills, including repairing communication breakdowns and adjusting to their audience's register (Antia et al., 2009). Studies show that deaf children often adopt controlling styles when communicating with hearing peers to avoid communication breakdowns, initiating more topics, making more comments, and taking longer conversational turns (Lloyd et al., 2001; Paatsch & Toe, 2014). Deaf students with lower speech intelligibility show less frustration during breakdowns, being accustomed to clarification requests (Most, 2002), whereas cochlear implant users often prefer strategies that avoid communication breakdowns, including fewer confirmation requests, despite being considered collaborative communicators with hearing peers (Ibertsson et al., 2009). Strategies deaf students use to repair communication range from simple repetition to more sophisticated ones with training, like revisions or rephrasing without changing the message (Blaylock et al., 1995; Caissie & Wilson, 1995).

Deaf students' college success is also linked to how they adapt the support they receive to access content, which may include interpreters, communication assistants, and assistive technologies (Antia et al., 2009). Interestingly, deaf students' academic attainment is not solely tied to speech perception (such as the use of hearing aids or cochlear implants), but also to the use of mobile video interpreting services, texting devices, and FM systems (Convertino et al., 2009; Dammeyer et al., 2017). While some studies suggest that deaf students can learn equally well through various methods, such as signed instruction, real-time text, written texts, or interpreters (Borgna et al., 2011; Marschark et al., 2008; Stinson et al., 2009), the use of interpreters can cause communication delays and divided attention (Foster et al., 1999; Powell et al., 2014). Overall, despite improved content access, deaf college students still tend to learn less than their hearing counterparts (Borgna et al., 2011).

While most studies on deaf college students' communication are US-based, more UK-specific data is needed. Further Education (FE) colleges, offering qualifications outside higher education or leading to it, are the primary post-secondary destination for deaf students in England and Scotland. However, inconsistent support provision and an attainment gap between hearing and deaf students unexplained by additional special educational needs alone suggest a need to examine how educational contexts support deaf students (Fordyce et al., 2013; Young, Oram, et al., 2015; Young, Squires, et al., 2015). Besides, unique to the UK, Communication Support Workers (CSWs) offer pedagogical and communicational support, despite lower British Sign Language certification than qualified interpreters (Owen et al., 2016).

### *A dialogical lens on communicative (in)justice*

This study recruits a dialogicality framework (Bakhtin, 1984), viewing human semiosis as a social process where semiotic material gains layered meanings through dialogue among multiple participants (Linell, 2009). Dialogicality enables critical analysis of how some

individuals are excluded from equal participation in communication and dialogue (Marková, 2016).

Rommetveit (1991) coined the dialogical term epistemic responsibility, defined as the 'responsibility for making sense of the spoken about state of affairs and bringing it into language' (p 98). This led to an analysis of asymmetries in sharing this responsibility. A related concept is the division of communicative labour (Linell, 2009), examining how power dynamics influence interactions and guide responses. When dialogue is dominated by one perspective, it becomes monologised (Bakhtin, 1984; Linell, 2009).

From a dialogical viewpoint, assessing how educational environments can foster equitable communication involves addressing inherent asymmetries. This presents a paradox. Educational settings inherently have communication asymmetries as students are not deemed to possess the same knowledge or experience as teachers, leading to significant asymmetry in epistemic responsibility (Marková, 2016). However, all participants should still be accountable for respecting each other's contributions (Linell, 2009).

Epistemic injustices, coined by Fricker (2007), have a hermeneutic aspect highlighting how a social group's understanding can be hindered due to a lack of access to interpretive resources, or their expressive style being seen as a communication barrier. In education, this includes how dominant social groups structure the system, making understanding and self-expression challenging for subordinate groups (Kotzee, 2017). This is especially relevant for deaf students, because sensory asymmetry when interacting with hearing peers add complexity to their experiences. They are more visually oriented and use a visual-gestural language (De Meulder et al., 2019; Friedner, 2016). Therefore, communication rules should be reevaluated in mainstream classrooms and colleges to accommodate deaf students, rather than expecting them to conform to the majority style.

In sum, deaf students' college success relies not just on language skills and speech perception, but primarily on communicative flexibility and pragmatic competences (Raeve, 2015). Without specific training, these students tend to avoid communication breakdowns rather than use advanced strategies (Paatsch & Toe, 2014; Richardson et al., 2010). Deaf students also benefit from adequate communication support, such as assistive technology and interpreters (Marschark et al., 2008). Given the significant differences in support between the UK and other countries, it is important to examine the UK's college practices and support for deaf students. This could shed light on the communication skills they are expected to develop for their success. The present study asked: How is the responsibility for sustaining communication being distributed between deaf college students and their interlocutors when supported by CSWs?

## Methodology

This study followed an ethnographic approach. The approach was valued for its focus on identifying implicit dynamics guiding everyday interactions in specific cultural contexts (Denzin, 1997; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Observations focused on episodes of communication breakdown. While these episodes were uncommon, their value resides in the access they gave to the efforts at the 'backstage' of everyday communication in college. These episodes exposed the active effort behind what seems like seamless communication. For a broader description of translanguaging practices among observed deaf college students, refer to Iturriaga (2021) and Iturriaga and Young (2022).

During data production, the researcher, with Level 2 BSL certification, found it challenging to comprehend deaf students' more subtle communication strategies. However, his prior experience with Chilean Sign Language facilitated some learning transfer due to common linguistic features like verb inflection through space use or the topic-comment sentence structure (Adamo et al., 1999; Sutton-Spence & Woll, 1999). Being part of the SORD research group at the University of Manchester, which included Deaf doctoral and postdoctoral researchers, allowed access to native BSL input through formal and informal communication.

The researcher, previously unfamiliar with the participants, provided them with participant information in both written English and BSL. Students had a week to decide on participation and could ask questions during the informed consent process, conducted in spoken/written English and BSL. BSL-fluent Deaf Support college staff were continuously available for assistance. The study received ethical approval from The University of Manchester research committee (Ref: 2018-4625-7510).

The study observed 5 deaf students in Mill Town College (pseudonym), in Northern England. All 5 participants were profoundly deaf and chose pseudonyms for themselves, by which they will be referred to below. Katniss, 19, came from a multilingual hearing family that migrated to the UK when she was younger; she wore bilateral hearing aids. Derick, 19, wore a unilateral cochlear implant. There is no information about his family since he chose not to participate in an interview. Adam, 18, came from a multilingual hearing family and wore bilateral cochlear implants. Sam, 18, came from an English-speaking hearing family and wore a unilateral cochlear implant. Finally, Matt, 29, came from an English-speaking hearing family but at the time of the study was living with his own multilingual deaf and hearing family.

All five participants were observed in different classes during 3 months in 2019, with a total of 26 observed hours. The researcher sat close to the deaf student and their CSW to take notes. The CSW's occasional interpretation/translation to English when deaf students interacted with a hearing person, and the fact that Adam, Derick, and Katniss signed following English grammar and/or accompanied signs with speech, facilitated the researcher's comprehension of communication considering his then limited understanding of BSL. Field notes were produced by translating observed BSL into written English. Translation is made explicit below through the capitalisation of words in sign order, making visible the impossibility of fitting languages to one another (Temple & Young, 2004) and opening discussions over interpretation in ethnography (Denzin, 1997).

Field notes were thematically analysed (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Communication breakdowns, first noted when a less skilled replacement CSW struggled to communicate with a deaf student highly fluent in BSL, became a focal point of analysis. Consequently, all analysed communication breakdown episodes involved hearing CSWs with limited BSL skills or hearing tutors without BSL skills. Communication breakdowns, made evident in disrupted flow and repeated requests, were more noticeable when students blended BSL and English. However, they were harder to detect in deaf students proficient in BSL, with CSWs' spoken English inputs aiding in discerning the communication status between them.

Field notes were sub-sampled (Flick, 2009) to identify communication breakdown episodes. Iterative coding specified the cause, affected person, repair agent, and reparation strategy. Representative episodes were triangulated (Flick, 2009) by reviewing the written

fieldnotes with a BSL fluent hearing researcher, exploring to what extent asymmetries were well represented in interaction. Initially, findings were organised by underlying asymmetry (Linell, 2009), but were restructured to highlight participants' agency, especially deaf students' actions. This interpretation led to analytical themes (Braun & Clarke, 2022) on how actors managed communication breakdowns. NVivo 12 was used for text management, coding, and retrieval.

## Findings

This section examines the communication breakdowns deaf students faced in college, categorised into three themes based on the primary breakdown manager. The first theme highlights deaf students' efforts to sustain communication, the second focuses on CSWs' efforts with some tutor involvement, and the third presents the infrequent instances of shared responsibility. Fragments from ethnographic notes will be presented according to the following format: (Observation number, Paragraph number), later being contracted to: (O number, P number).

### *The burden of sustaining communication in deaf students*

Deaf students predominantly bore the responsibility of maintaining communication in college classrooms. When addressing asymmetries, they initiated interventions, facilitating further repair by others. They ensured comprehension for all, not just themselves. From a translanguaging lens, most repair strategies involved visual semiotic resources (BSL, written English, drawings, fingerspelling) or their layering with spoken English interactions. Thus, deaf students expanded semiotic resources while accommodating to the communication needs of hearing individuals.

Deaf students' comprehension was commonly affected because hearing tutors' and classmates' spoken English was not clear to them, representing a sensory asymmetry. When deaf students had more sensory access to spoken English, they were documented as repairing this by interrupting their tutors and asking them to repeat what they said. This movement tended to invite hearing tutors to repair by merely repeating rather than necessarily by rephrasing. That is, repair movements are not single interventions but potentially build upon one another.

In one of Derick's GCSE biology classes, he asked the tutor to repeat what she said:

The tutor then moves to the next question in her list, about who nearly published a book on speciation before Darwin. The right answer is Alfred Russell Wallace, but she explains 'you get a mark just for writing Wallace'. Derick asks the tutor 'get mark for what' and she repeats while just underlining 'Wallace' in the written name. (Observation 5, Paragraph 72)

By underlining the keyword on a whiteboard, the tutor is adding a visual component to her utterance in spoken English. This tutor showed an understanding of the visual orientation of a deaf student by often adding variations to her repair strategies by writing words and concepts, drawing, and underlining written English.

Another method observed for deaf students to repair communication breakdowns involved requesting the CSW to translate into BSL what another person had expressed. This action, in turn, involves the CSW in the repair process. It was often noted that



Adam and Derick would frequently ask their CSWs to translate the conversations of their hearing classmates.

Less frequently, deaf students' spoken English was unclear for other people, representing the other side of the coin in terms of sensory asymmetries. Indeed, not all deaf students chose to use their voices. When they do use spoken English, it represents a concession for communicating directly with hearing tutors and classmates, even in the presence of a CSW.

On one occasion, Adam used his spoken English when working in a one-to-one session with a hearing support tutor outside the classroom. When his English was not understood, he would fingerspell words or at least fingerspell the initial letter of that word:

They are reviewing the body's muscles, one by one. (...) After some minutes, Jerry cannot understand a word that Adam is saying, which is 'quadriceps'. Adam tries again by saying 'quadriceps' and by fingerspelling the Q with his hands. While I cannot guarantee that Jerry was looking at Adam's fingerspelling, he seemed to understand and they just carried on. (O1, P124)

While this translanguaging strategy could be deemed ineffective if the hearing tutor as an interlocutor does not know fingerspelling, it opens the possibility for the CSW as a third party in communication (present and watching but not intervening) to contribute to repair. This, however, would not be necessary most of the time as the tutor would benefit from the deaf student repeating what they just said. Overall, it shows how deaf students constructed their statements in a way that considered the needs of more than one person at the same time by simultaneously using various communicative resources. In other words, it is by their flexible translanguaging practices that deaf students could address more than one participant in communication at a time.

In one of Matt's technical workshop classes, a CSW with whom he had never worked before was assigned to him. A language knowledge asymmetry was created, given the technical vocabulary that Matt had constructed with his usual CSW was not available to the replacement one. This resulted in great difficulties for multiparty communication when the hearing tutor was involved. These barriers to communication were circumvented by Matt resorting to other CSWs present in the workshop due to other deaf students attending the lesson:

The CSW asks him WANT I WRITE? and he says 'yes'. The CSW then brings pen and paper and notes down vertically the numbers 1, 2, 3, as in preparing a list. Matt starts signing instructions to the CSW but he suddenly stops to think. He flickers his fingers and closes his eyes, looking very concentrated. There is another CSW close to them, so Matt turns to her and asks her something. He signs a sign I don't know and then adds WORD WHAT? the other CSW says a word and the CSW writes it down in the list. (O9, P14)

This example once more shows that Matt was able to identify and label the products correctly in BSL and only the CSW's lack of knowledge of specific technical signs was preventing the flow of communication.

Similarly, Katniss tried to repair communication when her CSW was the most affected person by a language knowledge asymmetry. When her CSW did not understand a sign, Katniss tried to fingerspell the word, making it closer to English. This, in turn, provoked a second repair movement by the CSW:

The tutor solves an exercise and both Katniss and the CSW comment on the result. Katniss points at it and signs BEEN. The CSW asks WHAT? Katniss fingerspells B-E-E-N and the CSW signs, as in correcting her, BEEN, GOT-IT. So, it seems Katniss knew the result and expressed this by signing BEEN, while the CSW offered a sign that she deemed better or more adequate for what she meant. (O5, P20)

What this fragment makes clear is that the misunderstanding is due to a lack of comprehension of culturally appropriate ways of signing. Katniss' intervention would seem odd for a person who has BSL as a second language, but the sign BEEN is one of the standard ways in which verbs are inflected into past time and therefore represents acceptable signing. The CSW offers a sign that would transform what Katniss is trying to express into something closer to how it would be expressed in English. An alternative interpretation is that the CSW is using another sign to match her understanding with that of Katniss'. Both situations show an imbalance in BSL knowledge between interlocutors, dis-favouring the CSW.

### *CSWs sharing the burden of sustaining communication*

Most of the time, if deaf students were not repairing communication, it was the CSWs who managed to identify communication breakdowns and intervene. The CSWs tried other repair strategies, different from the ones performed by the deaf student. Coming back to Matt's workshop observation, in which he and his replacement CSW were experiencing many communication breakdowns due to language knowledge asymmetries, the CSW would often improvise signs needed for communication and offer them to Matt:

While Matt is back working, I can see that she is drawing two pictures. In one of them the paint spray is thin and concentrated; in the other one, it is wide and dispersed. She shows Matt these drawings and connects some signs to each of them. (O9, P53)

The CSW was not merely crafting signs but was relating them to drawings and written English to make sure those signs were meaningful enough for the task at hand. This represents a translanguaging strategy that, while more gestural and therefore limited in its capacity to depict the full meaning of technical signs, would be temporarily accepted by Matt.

At other times, the CSWs would repair communication when language knowledge asymmetries affected deaf students. Deaf students may not always understand the meaning of words in English. This, however, cannot be interpreted as a matter of sensory access to English due to the request for a meaningful explanation, as opposed to asking the tutor to repeat or merely asking the CSW for a translation. For example, in the following fragment Katniss seems to be unsure of what the word 'fair' means in the context of a mathematics GCSE mock assessment:

Katniss goes back to reading her exam booklet. She points at the word 'fair' in a problem about throwing a fair dice and says she does not understand. She signs EQUAL and the CSW explains this misunderstanding to the tutor. The tutor explains and the CSW translates to BSL, adding more explanations than can be found in the tutor response: FAIR BECAUSE DICE THROW, WHAT THERE WHAT, ANY NUMBER. (O5, P41)

By pointing at written English and signing her misunderstanding, Katniss initiates a repair strategy that allows the CSW to intervene to add to the hearing tutor's explanation. Thus, repair is layered because the three of them act. However, the role of the CSW is key in two

senses. Firstly, the CSW supplements the tutor's lack of BSL skills required to establish direct communication with Katniss. Secondly, the tutor's explanation is not merely translated but complemented with further signed clarifications.

The CSWs would sometimes recruit help from tutors when facing a mixture of subject matter knowledge asymmetries and language knowledge asymmetries. The first refers to the difference in knowledge between the tutors, who are explaining the subject in spoken English, and the CSWs, who are trying to convey the meaning in a visual-gestural language. In turn, language knowledge asymmetries involve lack of understanding of how to depict technical knowledge in a Signed Language, which often requires access to a specific genre that is mostly known to members of Deaf communities. In one of Katniss' classes, the CSW would repeatedly express difficulties in translating mathematics:

The tutor explains how a division can also be expressed as a fraction and as a decimal. While explaining this to Katniss, the CSW signs the division sign by "drawing it in the air", signs the fraction by placing one number on top of another in space and the decimal as NUMBER POINT NUMBER. Katniss shows a confused face after this. (O5, P16)

Later, the CSW was noted to repair by asking the tutor to explain himself how to solve exercises for Katniss by writing down step by step how to solve an equation. The CSW later added 'I find it easier' (O5, P32). Therefore, repair was initiated by the CSW but partially delegated to the tutor. Therefore, these interactions represented moments in which the CSW tried to explain concepts or give answers in visually incorrect ways for a BSL user (i.e. the signs are not adequately representing a mathematical concept in signed discourse). Translating mathematics to signed discourse is not an obvious matter as it requires a finer understanding of how visual and gestural semiotic resources are used to convey concepts.

Indeed, CSWs have a very challenging task at hand by translating content from many subject matters: they need to understand what the tutors are explaining to properly translate and facilitate communication between the deaf student and other people. In the classroom context, dialogue happens around subject matters defined by a curriculum in which the tutors (are supposed to) perform with greater mastery. This causes inconveniences for the CSWs if they are not able to meaningfully follow the tutor's discourse. In fact, even if CSWs try to repair, they are not always successful.

In one of Katniss' mathematics classes, it became evident that the CSW was struggling to provide a proper translation. On top of the already mentioned problem of signed mathematics as a genre, the CSW needed to understand better what the conversation was about, as can be seen in the following fragment:

The CSW is now interpreting again what the tutor says. She signs CONFUSE THAT, to which Katniss asks CONFUSE? and the CSW signs WAIT THEIR CONVERSATION pointing to the rest of the class. It seems that, since the tutor is mentioning a lot of numbers and letters while he is talking about equations, the CSW is not having an easy time translating in a coherent way. Waiting for the rest of the class to discuss the matter seems to be a useful way of making sense of what happened. (O5, P6)

Since the CSW is primarily affected, she is the one trying to perform a repair strategy. However, there is no evidence later in that class that the repair strategy was successful. By waiting for the conversation to unfold to have a clearer sense of it, dialogue moved to another point and repair became indefinitely delayed.

Finally, there were occasions in which it would be the hearing tutor who would make the initial movement of repair. By pointing out that what the deaf student has understood is wrong, they delegated the task of properly explaining it to the CSW. This would occur mostly when deaf students are able and willing to give an answer in spoken English. In such circumstances, this is something that can only happen when deaf students do the aforementioned linguistic and sensory concessions of using spoken English.

### *Shared ways in which communication was sustained*

There were circumstances in which breakdowns were actively managed by more than one person at the same time. This was not observed often, and only happened in the workshop sessions, in which the hearing tutor had ample experience of working with deaf students. He even had a deaf teaching assistant.

Disparities in language comprehension often create dialogically shared communication breakdowns: they are shared concerns for the deaf student, the CSW and the hearing tutor. However, while more complex repair strategies seem to be performed in a way that involve more people in them, most of these sequences of repair seem to begin with the deaf students' interventions. For example, Matt creatively circumvented communication breakdowns due to his CSW's lack of knowledge of technical signs:

Matt stands up and goes to the room where they have more tools and products. He brings a pot with a product and points to its name (...). Matt is using the product pot to look for something in his computer document. He is pointing to the product name and searching for that name in the document. The CSW then helps him by pointing specifically where the name is located. The tutor leaves. Matt, after spending some minutes looking for something in his documents, stands up and goes for another product pot. I can hear the CSW saying that is the same product but from a different company. The tutor comes back and asks him what the product he brought does. The CSW translates THOSE DO WHAT? Matt replies DO SAME BOTH. The CSW translates to English. Then the tutor asks, 'which did you use?' and the CSW translates USE YOU WHICH? Matt points at one of the pots. 'Let's try that one, then', says the tutor. (O9, PP40-43)

Matt knows the signs for classifying the different products but does not know the words in English. In turn, the CSW lacks the technical BSL vocabulary that Matt has been developing through his course and therefore is unable to understand the specific meaning of technical signs and translate them for the tutor. Therefore, Matt repeatedly inscribed objects in communication, making them ostensibly available for everyone involved through pointing gestures. When written English was available, Matt would also point to it. These translanguaging strategies offered communication opportunities that were joined by everyone. The hearing tutor during that class would show a great communicative attunement by also bringing products and other objects for them to discuss and by paying visual attention to Matt's signed explanations to obtain valuable information of his knowledge of procedures.

### **Discussion**

When inclusion is reduced to mainstream setting placement, the responsibility for ensuring deaf students' learning is transferred to deaf students themselves and their support staff (Murray et al., 2018; Snoddon & Murray, 2019). In the context of the present study,

this resulted from college staff's lack of or limited BSL skills. This uneven distribution of communicative labour (Linell, 2009) is concerning when it privileges hearing norms over the needs and preferences of deaf populations that are supposed to benefit from inclusion efforts.

Evidence of deaf students' communication and learning in college contexts shows that they benefit from building a flexible approach to communication that goes beyond languages (Antia et al., 2009), but still emphasises their individual skills for sustaining and repairing communication (Snoddon & Murray, 2019). This ethnographic study sought to address the lack of understanding of how the arrangement of support for deaf students in the UK has an impact on the distribution of responsibility for communication in college settings. Findings analyse communication breakdown episodes and repair strategies deployed by deaf college students and their communicative partners in one further education college in Northern England.

Deaf students' active handling of communication breakdowns could be observed in their plural yet imbalanced repertoires for repair strategies, including spoken and signed languages and non-linguistic resources. This reinstates the importance of communication flexibility for academic success at college (Convertino et al., 2009). Translanguaging (Swanwick, 2017) was deployed during communication breakdowns, opting for different semiotic resources to communicate the presence of such breakdowns and repair understanding.

Analyses made evident communication was repaired during almost all the observed communication breakdowns. The controlling style of deaf students (e.g. Paatsch & Toe, 2014) was not observed since most situations were controlled by teacher's discourse, emphasising content-deliverance approaches of teaching. Deaf students showed some flexibility in terms of the variety of their deployed strategies for repairing communication – yet it is assumed that they could still benefit from explicit training in strategies beyond (asking for) repetition of statements (e.g. Caissie & Wilson, 1995).

The presence of a CSW provided deaf students with a choice in terms of which semiotic resources to mobilise to repair communication, somehow levelling the expected imbalance in linguistic competencies related to spoken English and BSL (Most, 2003). However, the different language skills, as well as the socialisation in different sensory orientations (predominantly oral/aural or visual) of all involved parties, inscribed other kinds of asymmetries in the complex communicative situations observed (De Meulder et al., 2019).

On the one hand, CSWs' presence allowed deaf students to relatively share epistemic responsibility (Marková, 2016), as CSWs were trying to provide access to content through deaf students' preferred semiotic resources. On the other, the distribution of communicative labour was not necessarily shared with other hearing people in the classroom beyond the CSW. This reflects concerns regarding deaf students and interpreters being burdened with responsibility for learning (Snoddon & Murray, 2019). This repeated experience could produce a microsialisation (Valsiner, 2014) in the dominance of hearing norms and communicative preferences, coalescing in epistemic injustices over time (Kotzee, 2017), and therefore threatening deaf individuals' multilingualism.

These issues have wider implications for the promotion of translanguaging in environments that mix hearing students with deaf sign language users. Semiotic repertoires cannot be fully enacted as meaning-making tools when sensory access to resources is

unequal (De Meulder et al., 2019; Most, 2003). The theoretical implications of these findings amount to the need for reciprocation of semiotic repertoires between interlocutors to effectively translanguage. An interactional and dialogical notion of translanguaging is thus emphasised, in which interlocutors need to actively co-construct layers of multi-lingual and multimodal semiotic material in a complex orchestration of their repertoires (Thibault, 2021; Wei, 2018; Zhu et al., 2019).

Findings from this study reveal how discussions over language rights of d/Deaf peoples cannot be divorced from matters of educational placement, especially when considering how contexts of communication are structured and transformed; the structuring of classrooms impact upon the exercise of languaging and the distribution of communicative labour (Linell, 2009). Overall, this produces a threat for inclusive efforts by unintentionally demanding that deaf students accommodate to the normative needs (Graham & Slee, 2008) of hearing people around them but not necessarily the opposite.

## Conclusions

This study showed how deaf college students and their Communication Support Workers (CSWs) manage communication breakdowns that are the result of asymmetries in language knowledge, sensory orientations, and subject matter knowledge. The researcher was not able to observe evident communication breakdowns in deaf-only classrooms that included a deaf teacher, showing the improvement that alternative, BSL-led communicative arrangements can produce for deaf college students. Results are relevant for researchers and practitioners interested in translanguaging by stressing how the plural and flexible communication resources deployed by deaf students became an asset to sustain communication when breakdowns happened in mainstream settings.

Deaf students in this study showed competency in dealing with communication breakdowns. The persistence of asymmetries in this FE setting could be an unintended source of learning: deaf students are socialised in a linguistic hierarchy that might not reflect colleges' best interest for deaf students. Practitioners could benefit from this study by training in recognising and actively tackling these asymmetries when they emerge, and researchers could further investigate how these asymmetries are experienced, managed and dealt with from the differing perspectives of deaf students and their CSWs.

The study also showed how the inclusion of CSWs not only allowed more room for deaf students' communicative competencies but also inscribed new asymmetries, adding complexity to the communicative situation: different people with different sensory orientations and varying subject matter and language knowledge meet. Practitioners should ensure higher BSL thresholds for CSWs, including passing a competence test to avoid language asymmetries. It is also critical that members of the Deaf community provide insight into less known genres like signed mathematics and sciences. Future research could explore if these asymmetries also appear with qualified BSL interpreters and/or in other college settings.

Finally, the study raises questions regarding the provision of education for deaf college students in mainstream classrooms. The burden of checking communication and dealing with breakdowns was placed on deaf students and their CSWs, which could be considered a source of inequality. This also emphasises how concerns with language cannot be separated from an examination of the placements in terms of being contexts of

communication. By being in mainstream settings, deaf students at college level are neglecting their communicative preferences if they aim for a good communicative fit with hearing people around them. Instead, deaf students should be offered classroom arrangements and resources that expand their communication resources and/or let them choose the communication means they prefer without feeling the pressure of making concessions to hearing people's preferences.

## Limitations

There was not participant triangulation on how asymmetries were experienced by people in the situation or to obtain post-hoc rationales of why they acted the way they did. Finally, the researcher's limited and evolving knowledge of BSL could have prevented identification of nuanced asymmetries in signed communication with more proficient BSL users and within deaf-only classrooms.

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