Conquering the Interpreter's Operational Space: Sign LanguageInterpreting Students and their Acculturation to Deafblind Clients

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Abstract

The author reports on how interpreting students developed their evidence-based practice while becoming interpreters for deafblind people. Focus group discussions were conducted with students to explore their thoughts about interacting with deafblind people, and their experiences after such interactions. Data from the focus groups were analyzed using qualitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 2013), with the aim of investigating how the mix of classroom instruction, preparatory role-play and practice placements influenced students' evidence-based practice. The findings show that teachers contributing with their own evidence-based practice prior to the practice placements helped students develop the initial basis for their evidence-based practice. The opportunity to act as interpreters for deafblind people developed their evidence-based practice. In other words, students brought learning experiences from one arena and used them as a platform for further learning in a different arena. Students developed their evidence-based practice and conquered their *operational space* as interpreters through this combination of learning processes.

Keywords: evidence-based practice, role-play, practice placement, interpreter students, deafblind people, conquering operational space

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According to Hatlevik (2014), professional education is about giving students the tools and techniques they need to function as qualified professionals. Hatlevik (2014) argues that programs aiming to prepare students for professional practice should be organized in a way that makes it possible to develop practical skills and competence to act, in addition to acquiring theoretical knowledge and reflection skills. Students develop their evidence-based practice during a training program. In most cases, students do not know the whole field of the profession that they aim to become a part of, so an important goal of teaching is to enable students to become familiar with the unknown.

The 3-year program of studies in sign language interpreting (SLI) at Western Norway University of Applied Sciences (HVL)[2] is one such professional educational program. One of the aims of the program is to help students develop the skill to interpret for deafblind people, which means that students must learn to not only convey certain messages, but also to guide deafblind individuals wherever they want to go, and describe the surrounding world in an efficient manner. In this article, I report on a study of evidence-based practice conducted with second-year interpreting students as they prepared to interpret for deafblind clients for the first time and then evaluated their experiences. Evidence-based practice has been well researched (Hole, 2008; Klee, Stringer, & Howard, 2009; Sackett, Rosenberg, Gray, Haynes, & Richardson, 1996). One recent indication of emerging interest in evidence-based pedagogy within interpreter educational research is an editorial (Napier, 2013) which appeared in the *International Journal of Interpreter Education*. As far as I have been able to ascertain, there is no previous research on the development of evidence-based practice by students interpreting for deafblind individuals. The only other existing work in this area comes from Shaw and Jolley (2007). Their project focused on assessing service-learning in the deafblind community—which prepares students in a postsecondary interpreter education program to work with deafblind people—shows that students' involvement in a deafblind community is critical to the information and skill synthesis that contributes to positive student outcomes. However, these students were not expected to have interpreting competence or to practice as interpreters at that point in their education, but rather to assist the community as support service providers.

1. The Research tradition and the Current Case

1.1 Evidence-Based Practice

[2] Until the 31st of December 2016, HVL was named Bergen University College.

Professional competence and learning outcomes in professional education can be described as the acquisition of theoretical knowledge together with practical skills, as well as the ability to manage and assess various scenarios that may occur in practice. Where such learning occurs in both the tertiary classroom and in practice (Hatlevik, 2014), students will start to develop their evidence-based practice.

Evidence-based practice was first acknowledged in the medical and allied health professions in the 1990s and is now increasingly implemented in other professions as well (Hole, 2008). In the field of medicine, evidence-based practice involves integrating individual expertise and the best external evidence from systematic research (Sackett et al., 1996). Evidence-based practice should enable the practitioner to make professional decisions based on empirical knowledge and scientific knowledge, as well as patients or clients' needs and wishes in any given situation (Bergen University College, 2012). Contrary to some critics' claims, the evidence-based movement is not trying to develop a "cookbook" with recipes for practice (Sackett et al., 1996). Indeed, professional practice could never be based on a rigid "recipe" (cf. Sackett et al., 1996). The diverse circumstances that arise during practice necessarily contribute to the wide range of external expertise practitioners utilize.

Teaching with student's evidence-based practice in mind means providing students with the best and most up-to-date knowledge in the field (cf.Ogden, 2008; Sackett et al., 1996). Classroom teaching is evidence-based, conveying the best research-based evidence relevant to the topic, together with the teachers' evidence-based practice and the client's knowledge. This way, students are provided with the best possible conditions for creating their own understanding of different practical situations and how to handle them.

1.2   Practice Placement

On-site practice provides students with the unique opportunity to develop skills and develop their own experience-based knowledge or evidence and has been documented as an important aspect of interpreter education (Godfrey, 2010). Through practice placements, which require navigating complex cognitive and social experiences (Cope, Cuthbertson, & Stoddart, 2000), students can try out different options of action in different situations and learn from them. Or as King (1993, p. 30) puts it "When students are engaged in actively processing information by reconstructing that information in such new and personally meaningful ways, they are far more likely to remember it and apply it in new situations." Neary (2010) adds that students become producers of knowledge rather than consumers of content when processing information in ways that are meaningful to them.

In order for a practice placement to be a safe learning environment, a mentor observes and supervises the students. The mentor, a skilled facilitator, guides students through a reflective process. Deeny, Johnson, Boore, Leyden, & McCaughan (2010) explain that this can help students to improve their ability to learn and internalize knowledge. Hatlevik (2014) holds that if students can process their recent experiences by reflecting on what they have seen and done, the learning process is enhanced.

As practice placements constitute an integrated part of professional education (Hatlevik, 2014), a body of research on how learning is connected to working life has developed. In her study, Hatlevik focused on students' development of skills in the fields of teaching, nursing and social work. She studied the factors affecting students' learning and the relationship between practice and theory. One of the most important factors identified was the potential links among learning in different arenas (classroom, practice placement and working in the field). In her research on nursing students, Hjälmhult (2007) recounts how nursing students' main concern was "how to obtain learning experiences to become a public health nurse" (p. 7). The students resolved that concern by conquering their operational space. Hjälmhult (2007, p. 7) defines 'conquering operational space' as a "basic social process with three identified phases". Each phase has its concepts, dimensions and properties that involve the *student role*, *student activity* and *relations with a supervisor*. The phases are, (a) *positioning*: searching for the role of "real public health nurse", occasionally participating in the activities and dialogue seeking; (b), *involvement,* working with the challenges of the role, selective participation and supervision seeking; and (c), *integration:* role integration, with increased cognitive control in students' actions and seeking of acknowledgement (Hjälmhult, 2007). The students she observed worked towards "obtaining independence, working against the system and [learning] to handle the suspense by daring to engage" (Hjälmhult, 2007, p. 8). Students' conquering of operational space went from glimpsing the operational space to adjusting to it, and finally realizing their potential

in the operational space. In my study, I explored how sign language interpreters in training seek to conquer their operational space when working with deafblind people.

1.3   Evidence-Based Practice – The Case

In Norway, three educational institutions offer a bachelor's program in SLI: Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences (2015a), Norwegian University of Science and Technology (2016a) and HVL (Western Norway University of Applied Sciences, 2017a).

Students in the SLI program at HVL learn Norwegian Sign Language during the first year; in the second year, students gain more insight into interpreting practice and the professional requirements for interpreters (Western Norway University of Applied Sciences, 2017b). They also learn about the interpreting profession and begin their own professional development process. Early in the first semester of the second year, students are introduced to different groups of people who use interpreters, including deafblind individuals and their organizations.

Deafblindness is defined in literature as a combination of visual and hearing impairment, a specific disability which limits the person's activities and prevents full participation in society (Nordic Centre for Welfare and Social Issues, 2015). Deafblind people have different degrees of impairment requiring various communication methods; tactile signing, sign language in an adjusted sign space, fingerspelling (hand alphabet), spoken language, written language (Berge & Raanes, 2011), social haptic[3] (Lahtinen, 2007), or a combination of these. They require individually adapted activities, which implies planning every form of communication, social interaction and communication with others, as well as orientation and moving around. An interpreter must therefore both interpret between deafblind people and the people they are communicating with, as well as describe the surroundings and what is happening around them. Interpreters also have to accompany the deafblind client wherever s/he wants to go.

Students are taught about deafblindness and the challenges it involves and are trained in various techniques used when interpreting for deafblind people (Western Norway University of Applied Sciences, 2017e) over 4 weeks during the second year and 3 weeks during the third year. This gives the students the opportunity to start to develop their own evidence-based practice. In this way, students acquire both research-based and experienced-based knowledge about deafblindness. Teachers also use their own evidence-based practice, based on what they have either experienced themselves or learned in discussion with peers, to create a platform for learning. In addition, students have 1 week of practice placement during their second year, and 1 week during their third year.

After the second-year students have gained some initial knowledge about deafblindness, they start learning about guidance, description and interpreting for deafblind people. Instructors use role-play in various scenarios to provide students with simulated real life experiences; for example, boarding a bus, with one student playing the role of the deafblind person while another plays the role of interpreter. Through such work, and the reflections and discussions that follow, students practice their skills in interpreting for deafblind people. Classroom instruction helps trainee interpreters learn about deafblind people, helping them to develop the basis for their evidence-based practice, which in turn allows training interpreters to gain experience from role-play. Similar pedagogical approaches are also used in other fields of teaching such as history (Stevens, 2015) and nursing (Deeny et al., 2010).

However, classroom learning is not enough to prepare students for real life (Deeny et al., 2010). Interpreting students may have to overcome a lack of confidence when beginning interpreting work with deafblind people, and inadequacy or fear of mistakes may cause stress among students (Swatzky, 1998). Knowing what their deafblind clients may be like as individuals will help students provide the most appropriate interpreting service. Kiger (1993, p. 315) has stated that there is a difference between "knowing about" and "knowing". Students cannot really know what it means to be an interpreter for deafblind people until they have experienced it. Moreover, adapting to the needs of individual deafblind people is a part of a sign language interpreter's responsibility, and is a skill that it is difficult to gain without the practice experience (Shaw & Jolley, 2007).

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[3] Social haptic is a system of tactile signs and touch messages used to provide information (Lahtinen, 2007, p. 7).

1.4   Practice Placement – The Case

The second part of the students' learning process is the practice placement. Interpreting students at HVL (Western Norway University of Applied Sciences, 2017c; 2017d), as well as at Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences (2015b) and the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (2016b) have two practice placements in interpreting for deafblind people during their training program.

At our university, SLI students have two 1-week practice placements with deafblind people, once in their second year and once in their third year. Prior to their first placement, they have 2 weeks in class learning about deafblindness where teachers share their own evidence-based practice. Next, they have 2 weeks of role-play where they interpret to each other in various scenarios. Following this, they have 1 week of practice placement in interpreting for deafblind people. During their third year of study, students have 1 week of role-play before they have a one-week practicum at Eikholt, a national resource center for deafblind people. Before their exams, students have an additional 2 weeks of role-play.

At HVL students are encouraged to take an active role in their own learning by planning some of the role-play scenarios and the activities for their practice placement during the second year. Through developing their own practice, students have the opportunity to create a framework for different situations, which they believe they can learn from. Students learn the necessary tools to create successful interactions with deafblind people, as part of the acculturation to the deafblind group (cf. Sam & Berry, 2006). In addition, and even though students only get to know a small number of deafblind people, the practice placement provides them with an opportunity to get to know the unknown, that is, the individuals behind the disability. This knowledge becomes part of their reflective practice (cf. Schön, 1983).

1.5   The Synthesis: Developing Evidence-Based Practice Through Practice Placement

Students in the SLI program (ranging between 10 and 24 students per year) have the 2 weeks of practice placement in interpreting for deafblind people as described above. During their second year, students plan activities such as using public transport, visiting a museum, eating in a restaurant, and going for short walks and guided tours around the city or other places. Students invite three to five deafblind people from the local community to participate in these activities, and this provides the students with the opportunity to practice acting as interpreters. The students guide, interpret and describe the environment to the deafblind participants, using spoken language, some tactile signing, and haptic communication. In their third year, students interpret at Eikholt, where both students and deafblind people stay for a week. While there, students from all three Norwegian interpreter educational institutions meet eight to 10 different deafblind people from all over the country, who may require different communication methods including tactile signing, sign language in an adjusted sign space, fingerspelling, spoken language,[4] written language and/or social haptic. The students interpret during a variety of different activities: lectures, workouts, hiking, canoeing, shopping, handicraft activities, and others.

Following their first week of practice placement, students reflect in writing on their experience, guided by five open-ended questions (see Appendix 1). Because responses are anonymous, students can answer honestly without fear of consequences for their grades. The questions help to raise student's awareness of the learning outcomes of their placement and give them experience in reflective practice. Instructors also use student feedback to improve the practice placement as an opportunity for learning.

Student feedback on both the planning and execution of the practice placement has been favourable, students believe the experience of meeting and interacting with deafblind people to be instructive and exciting. Following is a sample student comment:

> Very positive to finally be allowed interpret for "real" clients! We have interpreted and dealt with many different situations and have learned a lot from them. Especially to meet different deafblind people and making agreements with them and being able to adapt to their level.

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[4] Some deafblind individuals have residual hearing, which means they can perceive spoken language.

Students point to the broader base of their experience, that is, their evidence-based practice: "Positive in the sense that we have learned so much in the past week that would have been difficult to learn in a classroom."

Students also find the pedagogical combination of classroom teaching and the practice placement to be successful pedagogical combination. They write that experience of role-play in the classroom provides them with useful tools which they can put to use during their practice placement. The present study provides an empirically informed picture of how this combination of initial classroom instruction, role-play and practice placement influences students' evidence-based practice as interpreters for deafblind people.

2.   Methodology and Analysis

A qualitative, descriptive research design that uses focus discussion group interview was chosen, since the research question is primarily aimed to explore student experiences. In a focus group, participants get the opportunity to "explore issues relevant to the person-in-context" (Wilkinson, 1998, p. 112). Halkier (2002) writes that focus groups produce "accounts in action," meaning that the participants exchange accounts of actions and understandings as a part of an interaction in a social, familiar, everyday context around the researcher. By engaging in conversations about a certain topic, participants develop a metalanguage, they may also become more aware of their tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 1966). Participation in focus groups also gives students the opportunity to exchange accounts of actions and experiences interpreting for deafblind people, and thus learn from each other.

Findings were analyzed using content analysis, a "research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the context of their use" (Krippendorff, 2013, p. 24). Its aim is to provide new insights, informed practical actions and increase a researcher's understanding of particular phenomena (Krippendorff, 2013). While some critics in the quantitative field refer to content analysis as simplistic (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008), the method is flexible in terms of research design (Harwood & Garry, 2003). It is also content sensitive (Krippendorff, 2013, p.46), in that it aims to "to attain a condensed and broad description of the phenomenon, and the outcome of the analysis is concepts or categories describing the phenomenon" (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008, p. 108). Elo and Kyngäs distinguish the following three phases in the content analysis process: preparation, organization, and reporting. In the preparation phase the unit of analysis is selected (Cavanagh, 1997): this can be a theme or a word. Next, the data are organized in either an inductive or deductive way, depending on the purpose of the study. Finally, both the analysis process and the results are reported on by presenting a model, categories, and a conceptual system or conceptual map.

Inductive content analysis is recommended when research in a particular field is fragmented or when there is not enough knowledge about a given phenomenon (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). This is the method selected for this study. The analysis process starts with open coding, which involves the researcher writing headings and notes in the text while reading it. The researcher transfers these headings and notes to coding sheets, which can be used to generate categories (Dey, 1993) to describe the phenomenon in a way that may generate knowledge and increase understanding (Cavanagh, 1997).

For the purpose of this study, three focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted during the spring and autumn of 2012. The project specifically recruited students enrolled in interpreter training programs who had never worked or interacted with deafblind people. Four students from the second year were drafted (from 14 volunteers) and invited to participate in the project itself and the focus groups. The students were all women, aged 22–40, who had Norwegian as their first language. They signed an informed consent form, and the research was undertaken in accordance with national guidelines.

The four selected students were involved in this study in the planning, implementation, and analysis phases of the project, and were able to refer to their involvement in their bachelor's degree dissertations. All students explored different research question in their dissertations, and these questions were the topic in the third FGD meeting along with the project research question. This way, they did research on their own practice, which can be seen as a form of interactive action research (Postholm, 2007), in which participants conduct research on their

own activities and learn from them. In the course of the learning process, participating in research activity and developmental work helps students develop their own practice.

Students participated in three FGDs (using spoken Norwegian) at different stages during their training program. FGD 1 was held after 2 weeks of instructions and 2 weeks of role-play, but before their first practice placement (a 2-hour meeting in March 2012), FGD 2 after their first practice placement (also 2 hours, in April 2012), and FGD 3 after 1 week of role-play and the students' second practice placement (this meeting, in November 2012, lasted 4 hours). Students in placements wrote down their own observations and shared them with the other students in the FGDs. In addition, in reflection groups, students discussed the process of analysis, highlighting various recurrent themes and categories, together with the researcher, but in the end, the data analysis where done individually.

Aside from the researcher, another member of the teaching staff also participated in some of the research activity. This teacher and the research leader both facilitated the FGDs, aiming to create an open and welcoming atmosphere that would foster productive discussions among students. Teaching staff acted as facilitators rather than participants in order to allow students to feel they could speak freely without fearing they would be interrupted or assessed; ideally, with students' increased control over the discussion, the researcher's power and influence will be reduced (Wilkinson, 1998). The students' active involvement in the FGDs suggests that they participated without inhibition.

The FGDs were videotaped from several different perspectives, using multiple video cameras which had been placed at different locations in the room. In our experience, SLI students sometimes use signs to emphasize their points and the multicamera approach was used to capture this. The content was transcribed after every focus group (the work being divided among all those who had participated) and this included indicating the use of supporting signs, pauses, and the occurrence of smiles or laughter. All participants also checked the transcripts.

An inductive content analysis was conducted in view of the paucity of research in the area of students interpreting for deafblind individuals, and the dearth of studies on evidence-based practice within this specific field (cf. Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). For inductive content analysis, I noted observations and quotes in the text (using open coding). Citations included statements such as 'to me deafblind people are a group because I don't think of them as individuals' and 'it's hard to imagine them as different individuals, like us'. Notes were transferred to coding sheets, and similarities among statements were used to generate categories. For example, similarities in statements from the first FGD led to the category 'deafblind people considered as one homogeneous group'. Categories were condensed into three subthemes: (a) getting to know the person and the context, (b) moving from facing the unknown to coping with the unknown, and (c) setting boundaries. These subthemes were unified into one overarching theme: conquering the operational space as an interpreter. Figure 1 provides some examples to illustrate the process. Several other categories were generated, but only these three are essential to the main theme of the interpreter's 'operational space'.

Figure 1. Examples of the analysis process

Statements made during the FGD	Coding sheet	Subtheme	Theme
'To me deafblind people are a group, because I don't think of them as individuals.'	Deafblind people are a homogenous group	Getting to know the person and the context	Conquering the operational space as an interpreter
'Oh my God, they are just people.'	Deafblind people are just like you and me		
'So I was left with quite a few thoughts about the differences [relating to communication methods and personalities], which I did not think I should have.'	Overcoming insecurity	From facing the unknown to coping with the unknown	
'We get to know the people we interpret for, some small talk is important for us to establish a relationship of trust, right?'	Establishing a relationship		
'Do deafblind people really know what	Understanding one's		

they want to know?'	own role	Setting boundaries	
'Erm, in the end she [a deafblind woman] realized that I do not run around and serve dinner, this lady does not do that. Right, so then it felt very good in fact, that I managed to push back.'	Role-testing – on one's way to professional practice		

3. Findings

The findings below are exclusively based on data from the three focus discussion group interviews with student interpreters. Students' voices are presented in quotes, translated into English by the author for this article in order to illustrate categories or phenomena, and students' metalanguage also appears here. The quotes equally represent all four students who participated both in the planning and execution for the study. Each subtheme is described under its own heading.

3.1   Subtheme 1: Getting to Know the Person and the Context

Before students met deafblind people for the first time, they spent much time in FGD 1 talking about these upcoming encounters. They felt they were facing unknown and unfamiliar people. They were to a lesser extent focused on how they should interpret for them. Although students thought about the fact that deafblind people are people in their own right, like everyone else, they still mostly saw them as a homogeneous group. Participant 2 stated, "To me deafblind people are a group, because I don't think of them as individuals". Participant 4 said, "At this point, I imagine them as a homogeneous group." At the first meeting, students were unable to see deafblind people as individuals, but rather as a group of people who are deaf and blind; they *are* their disability. In other words students could not see beyond the disability.

Students did feel respect for deafblind people and realized that they themselves were not fully able to comprehend what it is like to be deafblind. Participant 3 put it as follows: "That they [deafblind people] have gone through such a change (…) also in ways that we are unable to completely understand", while Participant 1 added; "and fully comprehend".

In FGD 2, following the first practice placement, students had gotten some sense of who deafblind people are: "Oh my God, they are just people" (Participant 3). Students discovered that deafblind people are different individuals with different personalities just like themselves, with different needs and wishes in terms of interpreting, description and guidance. In addition, students mentioned that deafblind people did not behave as "[we] have learned [in class] that deafblind people should behave" (Participant 3), so students could not just "do as they're told [in class]" (Participant 1). Students meant that deafblind people were not merely passive "recipients" of interpreter services, but occasionally went ahead before the interpreter or did not respond to what interpreters were doing. As Participant 4 said; "I had planned that he [the deafblind man] should walk behind me, but that was not his plan (…) so he said; "let's go", and I just had to follow!" This made students feel slightly insecure.

Students gained even more insight into the diversity of deafblind people during their second practice placement. From seeing deafblind people as a homogeneous group, to seeing them as individuals, they now saw them as individuals in a group. During FGD 3, Participant 2 said: "If you get a large enough group, you will get all kinds of people in it". Students saw that sometimes deafblindness may be the only thing deafblind people have in common. Students discovered that even if there is a group of deafblind people, not all of them may choose to interact with each other at all times. They, like others, choose their interlocutors on the basis of whom they feel comfortable with. As Participant 1 stated: "When we were at Eikholt, I thought, as we all did, that everyone was

there and everyone would interact with each other… they are all deafblind (…) I thought: 'This is going great, everyone chat with everyone' (…) but they don't!"

3.2   Subtheme 2: From Facing the Unknown to Coping With the Unknown

Since the students did not have any experience with deafblind people, their practice placement also involved them going 'from facing the unknown to coping with the unknown'. As stated in the previous section, students had talked about how they felt about meeting deafblind people, especially in the focus group meeting before their first practice placement. Students felt interpreting for deafblind people would be both scary and exciting and fun, but also a huge responsibility. Such energy-draining feelings preoccupied them in FGD 1: "I'm both excited and anxious about the practice placement. Mostly anxious about meeting deafblind people (…) I'm kind of afraid we won't understand each other or that I'm going to feel embarrassed by the whole thing." (Participant 4). Most of all, they were ready to meet deafblind people and "finally try out in real life what you have trained for" (Participant 1). Students also felt additionally stressed because their very first interactions with deafblind people were going to be observed by supervisors and other students in the group.

"I was left with quite a few thoughts about the differences [relating to communication methods and personalities], which I did not think I should have" (Participant 4, FGD 2, following the first practice placement). Even though students knew about the differences in deafblind peoples' communication methods, they were surprised when they met them. Still, most of the students had a good feeling after their first encounter with deafblind people. They thought they had established a good relationship with them. However, they became emotionally affected when deafblind people did not respond to their interpreting and/or descriptions. Participant 4 got "very stressed and frustrated," and others felt similarly anxious, frustrated and insecure, which caused them to doubt themselves. When deafblind people responded and 'did as they were supposed to do', students felt a great deal of satisfaction: "It all went as it should have, I have learned this in class and that is how I'm going to do it, and that was very positive" (Participant 3). This may indicate that students felt that everything should go according to a routine acquired in the classroom; it worked when students did as they had learned in class, but it may also show a lack of flexibility on the students' part. Students were dependent on a routine and expected that the interpreter service user would show a specific response to specific stimuli. In other words, students did not appear ready to face the unknown at that point in time.

Students' insecurity gradually disappeared. After the second practice placement, in FGD 3, they expressed that they felt more confident and dared to enter into a dialogue with deafblind people about the latters' expectations and needs. Students were better skilled at making decisions when required: "Since we are studying to be interpreters, we have to maintain a focus on what an interpreter should do. And carrying a suitcase is not among an interpreter's tasks", said Participant 4, smiling. This indicates that students had gone from focusing on themselves and their insecurity to focusing on their task and their required impartiality as interpreters, as outlined in the *Ethical Guidelines for Sign Language Interpreters in Norway* (Tolkeforbundet, 2015). Students emphasized the importance of creating a relationship of trust with the deafblind individuals for whom they interpreted. Participant 2 said: "We get to know the people we interpret for, [and] some small talk is important for us to establish a relationship of trust, right?" They felt that their knowledge of deafblindness, interpreting skills and being empathic were important elements to draw from when interpreting for deafblind people.

3.3   Subtheme 3: Setting Boundaries

Students thought it would be difficult to find their own role limitations, as they had little or no previous experience in interacting with deafblind people. Before the first practice placement they expected to meet deafblind people who shared their expectations and were clear about what they wanted from an interpreting student. Students believed deafblind people were experienced in how to express such needs, and they were ready to follow their wishes. Although students expected orders from the deafblind people and were ready to carry them out, they also expressed thoughts like: "Do deafblind people really know what they want to know?" (Participant 2,

in FGD 1), and have deafblind people received information about "the interpreters' tasks and the interpreters' ethical guidelines?" (Participant 4).

After the first practice placement, in FGD 2, students reported being delighted when deafblind people acted in line their expectations. When deafblind people expressed desires and expectations beyond the circumscribed role of the interpreter, students preferred to fulfil them rather than adhere to interpreter boundaries. As Participant 2 pointed out: "We have to be service-oriented, right". And Participant 3 said, "I feel that it is that little naive part of us that says that we need to take care of deafblind people". Deafblind people had the power. The students still reflected and asked questions: "Where do you set the boundaries?" (Participant 2), but they had neither the knowledge nor the experience required to make on-the-spot decisions regarding boundaries.

Students gradually became more aware of the inadequate training deafblind people have in utilizing the services of interpreters and knowing what to expect from an interpreter—especially following their second practice placement. Students therefore began to take more control of the situation and interacted more with deafblind people where there were divergences between the individuals' wishes and what students perceived the role of the interpreter to be. Most students found that deafblind people were responsive to their opinions, although students found it difficult to assert themselves. If deafblind people had had previous experiences of interpreters making them cups of coffee, students felt it was difficult to decline such requests. Nevertheless, during their practice placement, students became more aware of both their own expectations and those of deafblind people in a given situation. As Participant 1 said in FGD 3, "Erm, in the end she [the deafblind woman] realized that I do not run around and serve dinner, this lady does not do that. Right, so then it felt very good in fact, that I managed to push back". Other students had similar experiences. Participant 2 said, "[When doing favors] you do not have the capacity to do what you are supposed to do [as an interpreter]." Experiences such as these gave students greater confidence in making decisions and standing by them, decisions that confirmed them in their role as interpreters rather than in the role of support person or friend, even if that was not what deafblind people wanted in a particular situation.

Through the practice placement experience, students' feelings about interacting with deafblind people evolved, from initially feeling tense and insecure about the unknown to feeling like they were on their way to developing into secure professionals. As they encountered challenges, they had to come to decisions about their professional boundaries and their role as an interpreter.

4.   Discussion

The aim of this study was to gain an empirically based, clearer view of how a combination of classroom instruction, role-play and practice placement influenced students' understanding of their evidence-based practice as interpreters for deafblind people. The importance of practice placement, in combination with classroom instruction, in SLI education, has previously been presented (Godfrey, 2010), but has so far not been fully described as essential for students developing as interpreters for deafblind people. In all three FGDs, the students had the opportunity to present, reflect on and share their thoughts and experiences about interpreting interactions with deafblind individuals.

The current study demonstrates that the combination of instruction, role-play and the two practice placements helped students develop a deeper understanding of interpreting for deafblind individuals. Basic education and authentic role-play situations presented students with the tools to fulfil their role as interpreters. Although students had expressed feeling anxious and insecure in the FGDs 1 and 2, especially when deafblind people had not behaved as students had expected they would, they were still confident that they knew how to perform various aspects of their role. Students' reflections on whether deafblind people know what an interpreter does suggests that instruction and role-play before practice placements is important.

This study also shows that role-play in this type of competency-based teaching is perhaps more important than it might be in an education based mainly on conveying theoretical content. In our case, theoretical teaching alone would be inadequate partly due to the limited empirical research in the area, but also because it would not give students sufficient preparation for their practical experience. Hatlevik (2014) points out that even though

theoretical knowledge (i.e. provided through instruction and role-play) gives students a valuable learning platform for further competence development, students must also learn how to carry out practical professional tasks. As Arrow (1962, p. 155) writes: 'Learning can only take place through the attempt to solve a problem and therefore only takes place during activity.'

It is essential that teachers have interpreting expertise and experience in order to give students a good starting point. The findings of this study show that students bring with them what they have learned in one arena, and use it as a platform for further learning in a different arena, namely in the setting of a practice placement, and the professional work setting after that; in other words, what Hatlevik (2014) refers to as transfer of learning.

In class, students reflect on and evaluate the ethical challenges they might encounter in different situations. It is clear from this study that only during the practice placement, when they establish a relationship with an interpreter client, can students exercise professional judgment, and reflect upon it. This is how students establish their professional identity. Hatlevik (2014) argues that if the students are experiencing the content of education as understandable, and if the content of education is relevant to the professional field, they will experience the connection between teaching and practice. The students in this study pointed out on several occasions that practice is about transforming classroom learning into their own practice. This aligns with what Shaw and Jolley (2007) found in their study on service-learning in the deafblind community. The study also confirms the suggestion by Higgs and Titchen (2001, p. 526) that "practice and knowledge are seen to occur in a dialectical relationship, which adds or synergizes the strengths of each to produce a combination that is essential to the professional role".

Students learning, mastering and acquiring confidence in practice can be compared with what Hjälmhult (2007) has described in her research on students in public health nursing education – that students conquer their operational space across three phases. The students in this study can be said to have undergone a similar development. Students went from being expectant, tense and insecure about meeting deafblind people to being more confident, and able to recognize the range of options of the interpreters' role. Thus, they were very insecure and tentative to start with, and the interpreter role was not a part of their actions. They were *positioning* themselves and starting to explore their role as interpreters. After the first practice placement, they still felt insecure, but were more reflective about their choice of actions. They started to realize the various challenge of the interpreter's role and began to ask questions as to "how to set the boundaries"; this was the *involvement* phase. During their last practice placement, students grew even more confident as they mastered various situations, and this can be seen as the *integration* phase. Students had gained an overview of the various activities they might be involved in when working with deafblind people, and felt a greater cognitive control over their tasks. In the course of their practice and learning processes, the students experienced, mastered and established their professional identity, conquering their operational space as an interpreter.

This study did not measure learning outcomes in terms of factual knowledge, which can be gauged before and after practice. Instead, students were invited to express their thoughts and experiences concerning the part of the teaching program that related to interpreting for deafblind people. Even so, all students in this study passed their practice placements and graduated as sign language interpreters upon completing their 3-year program of studies. Through their participation in this project, students became conscious of their practice as they developed it. In addition, documenting their experience in their bachelor's dissertations[5], helped to familiarize students with the research process. Over the course of the study, students and teaching staff developed an understanding of each other's practices, from which they will be able to draw in their future work (cf. Postholm & Moen 2009).

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[5] In addition, the students involved in this study used research material from this study when writing their bachelor's thesis. Thesis titles are as follows: "How Do Students Cooperate When Interpreting for Deafblind People?", "Am I Understood? – Interpreting for Deafblind People", "Interpreter – A Service-Supplier, But Then Again, Not" and "How Do Students Relate to the Professional Ethics When Interpreting for Deafblind People?".

5. Conclusion

This study explored how a combination of classroom instruction, preparatory role-play and practice placement influenced students' evidence-based practice. In the classroom, students were taught the best and most up-to-date research-based evidence relevant to working with deafblind individuals and the role of sign language interpreters in general. Students were prepared for their practical encounters with deafblind people by engaging in role-play, which involved simulated real life scenarios. During their practice placement, students had to face the 'unknown' and learn professional skills on the spot. This combination of pedagogical approaches allowed students to develop their evidence-based practice and to conquer their operational space as interpreters for deafblind people.

However, the study reported on here involved only a small sample of students, at one single educational institution in Norway. It would be interesting to investigate other interpreting programs, in other countries, to gain a broader perspective. This study did not present the views of deafblind people with regard to interacting with interpreting students in their practice placement. Therefore, future research could perhaps involve service users' perspectives as well, to further contribute to teaching practice.

Nonetheless, study findings may be of interest to other interpreter educators when planning spoken/sign language training programs, as well as those involved in teaching professional competencies in other fields, and which may entail similar educational challenges. Evidence-based practice may be implemented in other fields as well, in particular when teaching students about 'the unknown' are applicable to other fields. Finally, I hope that this study may contribute to a further development of students' evidence-based practice.

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Appendix 1

Questions to students after their first practice placement

1. What was positive about this practice placement? Why?

2. What was challenging about this practice placement? Why? And what can be done to improve it?

3. How will you evaluate yourself during this practice placement (Scale 1–10)? Describe what, how and why.

4. How will you evaluate the supervision/supervisor during this practice placement (Scale 1–10)? Describe what, how and why.

5. How will you evaluate your group during this practice placement (Scale 1–10)? Describe what, how and why.