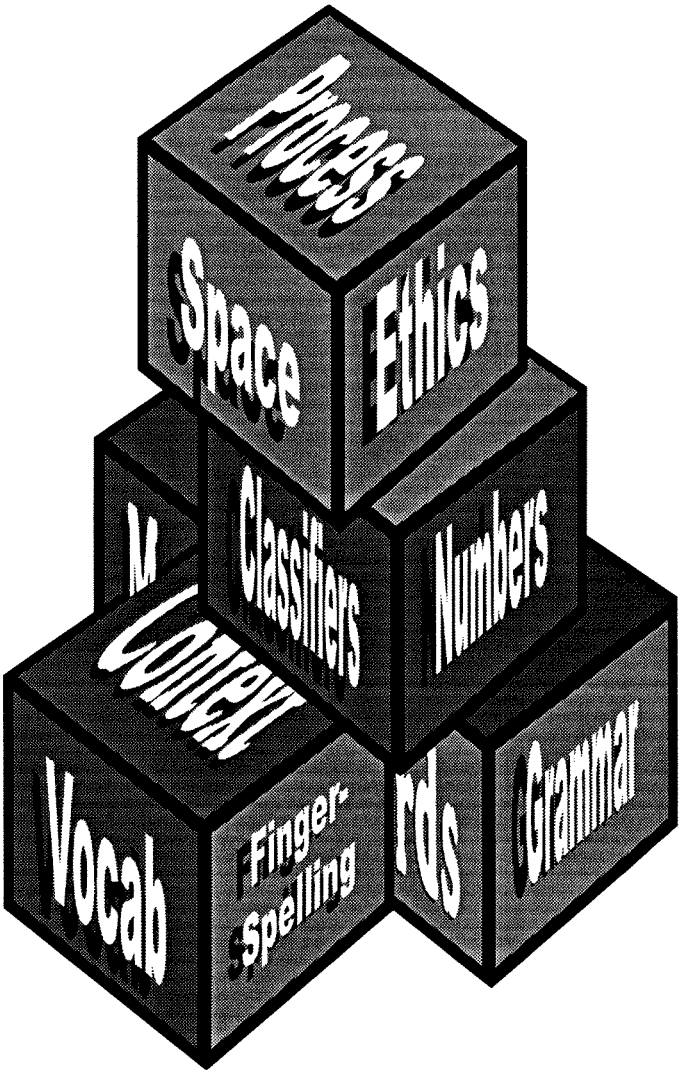
Self-Paced Modules for Educational Interpreter Skill Development

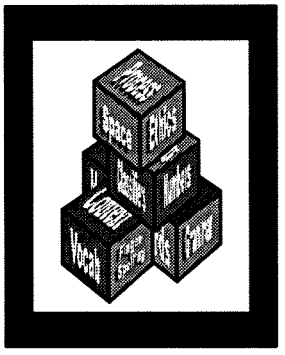


Classifiers

Module

Minnesota Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf

Self-Paced Modules for Educational Interpreter Skill Development



These self-paced learning modules are designed to be tools that educational interpreters can use to enhance their skills in pursuit of certification. Successful completion of this module series does not guarantee the interpreter will successfully obtain certification from the National Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) or any other certifying body, nor does it guarantee employment in an educational setting.

Any interpreter working with these modules must understand that the Minnesota RID, RID and/or Minnesota Department of Children, Families and Learning are not responsible for an interpreter's success or failure in taking any national certification test or in his or her pursuit of employment.

MRID, 1996

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I. Goals and Objectives

This module discusses Classifiers/Size and Shape Specifiers (SASSes) and their impact on the interpreting process. Because Classifiers and SASSes exist in ASL and not in English, most of the information in this module is geared towards working from a spoken source text into sign language. This module will also discuss sign to English interpretation of Classifiers and SASSes.

Upon completion of this module, the interpreter will:

- Understand common errors in Classifier use during interpretation into ASL.
- Develop strategies for dealing with Classifiers during an interpretation into English.
- Understand how Classifiers aid in comprehension of a transliterated message.

II. Equipment and Materials

√ TV

√ VCR

√ Camera

√ Audio Tape Recorder

Printed Resources

American Sign Language: A Teacher's Resource Text on Grammar and Culture by Dennis Cokely and Charlotte Baker-Shenk

Video Tapes

Tales from the Green Book by Dennis Cokely and Charlotte Baker Shenk. Videotape.

From Mime to Sign by Gil Eastman Videotape.

Handful of Stories I Videotape.

III. Time Line

Practice on use of Classifiers and SASSes is ongoing, but expect to take at least four weeks to work this module.

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IV. Pre-Test

1. Sit in any room, perhaps a classroom or a living room. Videotape yourself signing a description of where things are and what is in the room. Use only classifiers and the nouns (i.e. CHAIRS CL+CL+CL; BLACKBOARD CL+CL+CL) Describe everything, the furniture, what is on the walls, the lights and windows. Save this tape.

2. True/False Questions

_____ The Classifier for "a car" is always the "3" handshape.

_____ Classifiers and SASSes are not used in transliteration.

_____ Objects in space are generally described from the signer's perspective.

_____ Classifiers/SASSes cannot ever be used without first naming what the Classifier/SASS stands for (the referent).

_____ An acceptable way of identifying a Classifier/SASS referent is to mouth the word while signing the Classifier/SASS.

_____ Many Classifiers/SASSes can be used interchangeably.

_____ ASL is the only language system that uses Classifiers/SASSes.

3. Audio tape the following text. Interpret from the audio tape. Videotape the interpretation. Use the questions below to analyze the videotape. Do not record over this interpretation:

I was home the other night working in my kitchen. I had just gotten the pan down to cook a nice thick pork chop when my roommate came home. She had a friend with her and they went upstairs. I heard them talking in loud voices, but I ignored it. I set the table for my supper — place mat, plate, silverware, wine glass, salt and pepper. The cat kept jumping up on the counter and I kept tossing her on the floor again. I started chopping vegetables for a salad when I heard a door slam upstairs. The cat ran under the couch. My roommate's friend stomped down the stairs and out the front door. I heard her car start and peal off down the road. I waited for my roommate to come downstairs to talk, but she didn't. I sat and ate my dinner, the cat in my lap. Still no roommate. She never did come down that night. The next morning we passed each other in the bathroom and she acted like nothing had happened. I still don't know what the fight was all about.

Did you use Classifiers and SASSes? Why or why not? Where in the text did you use them? What handshapes did you use?

V. Overview and Activities

The information in this module is taken primarily from Charlotte Baker-Shenk and Dennis Cokely's Teacher's Resource Text on Grammar and Culture (1980) and Clayton Valli and Ceil Lucas's Linguistics of American Sign Language (1992). This module is not a course in Classifiers and SASSes. If you have not yet developed fluency with Classifiers and SASSes, consider taking an advanced ASL course, reviewing the information in the above texts, working with an ASL tutor or doing self-study with the Vista Curriculum. This module will deal with the most common errors that interpreters make with Classifiers and SASSes. For the sake of convenience, the word "Classifier" will be used throughout the module to represent both Classifiers and SASSes.

It is important to also remember that the study of American Sign Language is recent in relation to the study of English. Information is constantly being discovered that re-defines the elements of ASL. The study of Classifiers is very recent within the study of ASL. Classifiers exist in other spoken languages and this may help guide research in the future. For the time being, the language being used to describe/define Classifiers is in flux. Older descriptions outline handshapes, facial grammar, non-manual markers and movements. More recent research by Valli and Lucas describe "Classifier Predicates" — rules that govern how handshapes represent a class of objects and how combinations of handshapes can and cannot move. An interpreter today needs to constantly read new information on sign language linguistics to help keep abreast of the latest research. This is one of the most exciting and frustrating aspects of working with a language that is so newly defined.

A. Common Errors

Marty Taylor, Ph. D. has identified several common mistakes interpreters make when using Classifiers. Most of the identified Classifier errors she attributes to lack of ASL competency, not interpretation competency. (1993) It is important to remember that errors might also occur from a lack of process time. When analyzing your interpretations, try to determine if the errors are made from a lack of linguistic competency or from other factors.

In the following section, each error type is listed followed by suggestions and/or resources for improving or correcting each error type.

Common Error Type #1.

Using individual signs instead of a Classifier (e.g. signing: CAR+HIT+MAN instead of CL INDEX+C-A-R+CL-VEHICLE-HIT-CL-INDEX)

This is the easiest trap for interpreters to fall into, especially interpreters working in more English-based environments. Often we sign several "signs" for an idea that is more clearly expressed by using a set of Classifiers.

Common Error #2.

Inaccurate incorporation of the Classifier into the verb action.

This means an interpreter may present the correct Classifier for an object (a car) but then not use the Classifier in the rest of the interpretation. If the classifier is used to "drive down the hill," "run around the bush" or "drop from the sky," the interpreter is presenting a clear visual picture of the verb action, and buying process time as a side benefit.

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Common Error #3.

Using a Classifier without a referent

Classifiers represent nouns, sometimes in combination with a verb movement. The noun needs to be stated somewhere in the interpretation before the Classifier is used. Simply having a "3" handshape appear does not clearly tell the consumer whether that represents a car, boat or bicycle. Mouthing the noun along with the presentation of the Classifier is not sufficient. Once a Classifier is established, however, the Classifier serves as the pronoun for the object and does not need re-referencing until the topic has changed. If a Classifier is clearly positioned in a place (a cat sitting on a windowsill), other objects can then be referenced and placed in space. The original object (the cat) then can be re-referenced by using just the Classifier without the sign glossed as CAT. Classifiers don't always have to be preceded by the sign for the object if it is clear in context what the object is. Interpreters need to be using some of their mental energy while monitoring the target message to make sure that the Classifier used has somehow been identified in the interpretation.



Record the following paragraphs on audio tape. Before you begin your interpretation, visualize the text using the strategies for pre-interpreting from the Process Module. Decide if you will interpret consecutively or simultaneously. Video tape your interpretations, working from the audio tapes. At this point, focus on interpretation, not transliteration. You may come back to these exercises for transliteration practice after going through the entire module. Watch your video-taped interpretation in light of Common Errors 1,2 & 3. See if these errors are present or absent. Reflect on your process to determine what factors led you to either sign many signs instead of using a Classifier, not identifying the referent for a Classifier and/or failing to incorporate identified Classifiers.

A. Jenny and Chris rode their bicycles up the hill, side by side. When they got to the top, Jenny zoomed down with Chris trailing behind. Unfortunately, Jenny hit a pothole and tumbled head over heels, her bike crashing into a row of parked car. Chris made it down safely and helped Jenny get home.

B. I went to have a professional photo taken. In the studio, the photographer put a stool on a huge sheet of paper that came down from a big roller on the ceiling all the way to the floor. Then she adjusted several lights that were on tall poles. Attached to the front of each light was a big white square. These helped the light be less strong on my face. Then I had to perch on the stool, 3/4 turned away from the camera. The photographer had her camera on a tripod and spent a lot of time focusing the long lens. It took about 30 minutes to do all the photos. The photographer kept giving me instructions to tip my head down, up, right, left, smile, don't smile, look up, look down raise my shoulder, drop my hand and so on. The proof sheets were ready in two days and I got my final prints one week later.

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Common Error #4.

Handshape is inaccurate for the object

Research by Lucas and Valli categorizes which kind of Classifiers can be moved, which cannot show movement of an object and so on. They do not actually describe handshapes, but have defined categories such as "whole entity morphemes" or "depth and width morphemes." The research proves that there are rules that govern which handshapes represent certain ideas. This means that even though there are many ways to represent a noun by using a Classifier, they are not arbitrarily interchangeable.

Baker-Shenk and Cokely show a wide range of Classifiers in their Teacher's Resource text videotape. The basic Classifiers shapes for vehicles, animals and objects are familiar to interpreters. The same is true for basic handshapes that show amounts, sizes and surfaces. The more fluent interpreters will not always use one Classifier every time they hear an English word like "car." For example, generally, the "3" handshape held horizontal means a vehicle. However, if the speaker is talking about the surface of the vehicle, a more fluent interpreter may change the handshape to a flat "B." Sometimes buildings are represented by a "claw" or "bent 5" handshape, sometimes by an "A" handshape. Other times a building might be described using flat "B" handshapes to show the sides of the building and the floors and index fingers to outline windows and other detailing of the facade.

Different Classifiers are used when you are close to an object, when you are farther from the object, when the object is the subject of the conversation, when the object is not the main focus, and when you need to show relationships between objects. The key is to have a clear visualization of the message you want to render in ASL. Because there is a certain iconicity to the language, use the mental image to choose the handshape that shows the object most clearly.

Common Error #5.

Relationship of objects designated by Classifiers is unclear

This error happens when an interpreter pluralizes a sign (i.e., PAPERS) and it is not clear in the interpretation whether the papers are strewn randomly around a desk or in neat rows. This error also means that one object may be in relation to another (a teacher to the desk in the back of the room) and the interpreter is not rendering the relationship clearly in the interpretation.

Proper usage dictates: (extracted from Baker-Shenk and Cokely)

When showing rows of any object — (desks, books, pencils, papers):

- one hand, usually the non-dominant hand, stays still.
- the other hand moves in whatever direction the rows are arranged.
- both hands hold the handshape for the classifier.
- the description follows the perspective of the signer. For example, papers stacked in piles on a desk would be signed from the interpreter's point of view, not from the consumer perspective.
- The interpreter's eye gaze follows the moving hand.

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If the objects (papers, books, desks, pencils) are not arranged in rows:

- both hands move in alternating movements showing the arrangement.
- both hands hold the handshape of the Classifier.
- the arrangement is distributed from the signer's perspective.
- the interpreter's eye gaze follows the hands.

When describing an object that is symmetrical (an index card, telephone pole or picture frame):

- both hands take the same handshape and move at the same time.
- description follows the perspective of the signer.
- eye gaze follows the movement.

If the object is asymmetrical or a surface (a road with a dip in it, the outline of a state):

- one hand stays still while the other moves.
- both hands hold the same handshape.
- description follows the perspective of the signer.
- eye gaze follows the movement.

When showing relationships of one object to another:

- one hand, usually the non-dominant, is referenced and placed (the teacher) this Classifier stays in place throughout the rest of the phrase.
- the second object is referenced and placed in relation to the first object (the table in the back of the room).
- description follows the perspective of the signer.
- eye gaze follows the movement.

Common Error #6.

Use of outlining is inaccurate

Outlining of an object needs to closely represent the actual shape and size of an object. For example, a postage stamp should be a small square. The state of California should be proportionally larger and include the slight bend in the rectangular shape of the state. A portrait on a wall should be a larger square than a picture on a desk.

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1. On videotape, sign an outline, of a map of the United States and a particular region (the South, Mid-west). Be conscious of the relative size of states to each other, the meeting of borders and relative position of one state to another.

   The next several practices involve comparing an interpretation with a text by a native speaker. This is not done to try to have the interpreter learn the "right" way to sign a text, but to invite comparison and discovery into the different options for Classifiers use in a text. When looking at their own interpretation, the interpreter should focus only on Classifier usage, not grammar, vocabulary or other areas. Use the Gish techniques for self-analysis in the Process Module to analyze the interpretation. Determine what factors influenced you to use or not use Classifiers in the same areas the speaker did.

2. Choose a videotape of an ASL speaker with a voice interpretation that you have not heard before. This can be a story or a lecture. Turn the TV away so you can't see the signer and videotape yourself doing an interpretation from the voice on the videotape. Then watch and compare your interpretation to that of the original speaker.

3. Audio tape any of the sentences from the Classifiers chapter in the Teacher's Resource Text by Baker-Shenk and Cokely (Chapter 10). Videotape yourself interpreting these sentences. Compare your interpretation with the ones written in the book or demonstrated on the videos.

4. Watch/videotape a cartoon. Recreate the cartoon, videotaping yourself, keeping in mind handshapes, facial grammar and size relationships of objects. For a comparison text, watch Ella Mae Lentz's telling of a Road Runner Cartoon in the Green Book videos.

5. Get Gil Eastman's "From Mime to Sign" videotape number 3. Videotape yourself telling a 5 minute version of Cinderella and/or Snow White. Use as many Classifiers as you possibly can - assume your audience is a group of ASL users who are familiar with each story. Compare your version with Eastman's versions on his video.

6. Get the "Green Book" student texts video for lessons 1-9 or the "Tales from the Green Book" video. Watch any of Larry Burke's stories. Videotaping yourself, try to "shadow" interpret the stories - signing the story as he does. Notice differences in facial grammar, handshapes and movement from what you normally do in interpretation.

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Common error type # 7

Non-manual facial grammar is inaccurate

Non-manual facial grammar happens most with Classifiers that move or are descriptors. The non-manual facial grammar in combination with the Classifiers provide the same information that adverbs and adjectives do in English, i.e. how fast the car was going, how tall the tree is, how thin the ice was. The Green Book video tapes show excellent use of non-manual facial grammar in conjunction with Classifiers. Becoming comfortable using facial grammar is a matter of time and practice. When reviewing videos of your interpretations, check to see if any facial grammar showing adverbial and adjectival information is present.

Interpreters sometime substitute a sign for facial grammar such as the sign glossed as VERY instead of inflecting the Classifier with movement and facial grammar. Using facial grammar instead of the lexical sign to represent the English word "very" is more fluent and efficient. Remember, of course, that if the speaker's goal is to teach about adjectives, the interpreter may choose to keep the lexical item "very" in their interpretation. If this is the case, there still needs to be the proper facial grammar to show the concept of "very." There is no one-to-one relationship between a particular Classifier and a particular facial grammar. Rather, the facial grammar is a reflection of the information about the object or action that the Classifier describes. Refer to the Grammar module for more information about facial grammar.

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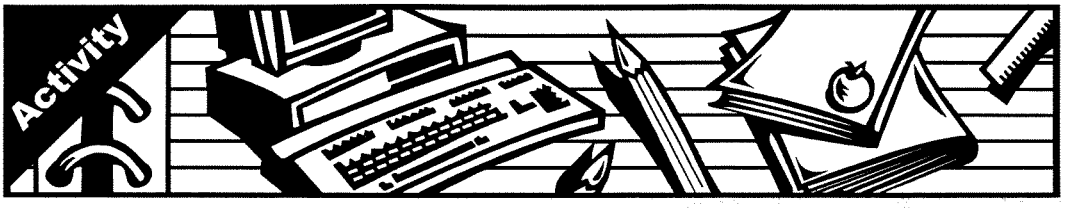

1. Generate as many English sentences as you can describing how a person moves. Here are a few to get you started:

   He staggered out.

   She thumped along behind her mother.

   They scuttled down the alley.

   A variant on this exercise is to watch people walk and try to find a descriptive word for their movements. Do the same for animals and vehicles.

2. Attempt, as best you can, to re-create the pre-test exercise where you describe a room, this time doing so in spoken English. Audio tape yourself. Describe what is in the room, where it is in relation to other objects in the room. Listen to the tape and see if certain words are used over and over again. Figure out what factors are influencing your word choices or where you become bogged down in the description. For fun, compare the length of time it takes to describe the room verbally and in sign language.

An addition to this exercise is to audio tape a description of a room (or even a room in a doll house) and then have someone listen to the description and draw or arrange the doll house as described.

Additional

Refer to the module on Vocabulary and do some vocabulary-building exercises from that.

Refer to the Interpreting Process module and do the activity listed in Part II (pre-interpreting skills) under number 4 (Analysis). This exercise in voicing for a cartoon is forcing the same process that interpreting for classifiers does.

Be aware that there are some situations where an interpreter may be voicing too much. This is different than the example earlier (the car bumped and bumped and bumped along) There are situations where the speaker is making a point that is visual and the interpreter keeps talking rather than remaining silent and letting the audience focus on the visual rather than the auditory message. An example of this might be in a doctor's office where a patient is describing a particular pain location. The interpreter may want to say something like "This is where the pain is." and then allow the doctor to look at the area that the patient is describing using a Classifier. Another time this might happen is when the speaker is demonstrating a particular sign, or Classifier. If the point the speaker is making is to challenge the audience to focus on the visual imagery, the interpreter is not accurately conveying the message by voicing or attempting to describe that visual imagery.

Deaf storytellers often use a great number of Classifiers in their stories. Interpreters should strive to voice only the minimum amount of information necessary to make the story clear to the audience and allow the visual messages in the Classifiers to tell the rest. To see a rather extreme example of this kind of voicing for a storyteller, visit the Minnesota History Center's Deaf Community Exhibit in St. Paul. Billy Yount tells two stories and the interpretation allows the visual imagery to primarily carry the story.

B. Sign to Spoken English

Classifiers sometimes can be a challenge to interpret into spoken English. This is primarily because they are a much more efficient way to describe an action, object and a location than English. Time management strategies outlined in the Interpreting Process module will greatly increase your ability to voice Classifiers. Take time to develop full visual images and to process the incoming message before composing your English interpretation. This will help you avoid using too many words for an action represented by a Classifier (e.g. "The car bumped and bumped and bumped along.") Processing fully will also aid in choosing the most appropriate word to represent a Classifier instead of using the same word each time the Classifier is used. For example, the sign/Classifier generally glossed as HUGE (Cha) should not always come out in a voice interpretation as "huge." There are many words in English that can convey that idea; enormous, large, massive, gigantic. Sometimes several words are necessary to make an equivalent interpretation. Again, the interpreter must be prepared to manage the incoming message and the process so that the most equivalent interpretation is done.

C. Transliteration

Interpreters often think that transliterations do not include Classifiers because they do not occur in English. This is not true. The better transliterations incorporate Classifiers in order to provide visual information that is not represented by English words. Transliteration uses English grammatical structure, but the target language is still visual. Classifiers show movement, relationships, size and shape much more accurately than strictly lexical signs alone. In it's description of transliteration, RID notes that a successful transliteration will include classifier constructions. Marina McIntire in a 1992 presentation to the Conference of Interpreter Trainers notes that certain ASL features incorporated into successful transliterations include use of Classifiers.

Interpreters need to analyze the situations where they are expected to transliterate and make some decisions about use of ASL features such as Classifiers. One of the factors that may influence use of Classifiers is the speaker's goal. If the goal of the speaker is to somehow make a point about English or to teach either English vocabulary or grammar, the interpreter may use fewer Classifiers and rely on lexical signs for adverbs, adjectives and objects. Classifiers can still be used in conjunction with those signs for visual clarity. If the speaker's goal is not specifically related to English vocabulary or grammar, the interpreter may be able to incorporate more Classifiers, keeping the English grammatical order and mouthing of English words. In any case, Classifiers still need to be referenced - an index-finger classifier cannot suddenly appear without some indication of what that is, i.e. PENCIL+CL.

Let's experiment with the English sentence: "The pencil is lying on the table." A clear transliterated message would somehow incorporate the Classifiers for the pencil as well as the table surface. This could happen by signing the sign for pencil, signing a classifier for "lying on" and then signing "table" all with the mouth movements for the English sentence. Or the sentence can be signed by something we might gloss as: PENCIL (point) TABLE + CL for pencil. There may be other variants



Do any/all of the practice exercise in this module transliterating the text. If you are doing an exercise that asks you to compare your transliteration to a video of a Deaf speaker, use Jerry Jordon's story "Spaced Out!" in the videotape "Handful of Stories 1" from Gallaudet University as your source text. This is a text generated by a Deaf person that is presented in English-like grammatical order but using a mix of signs, fingerspelling and classifiers. You could also use one of the Transliteration model series videos from Sign Enhancers.

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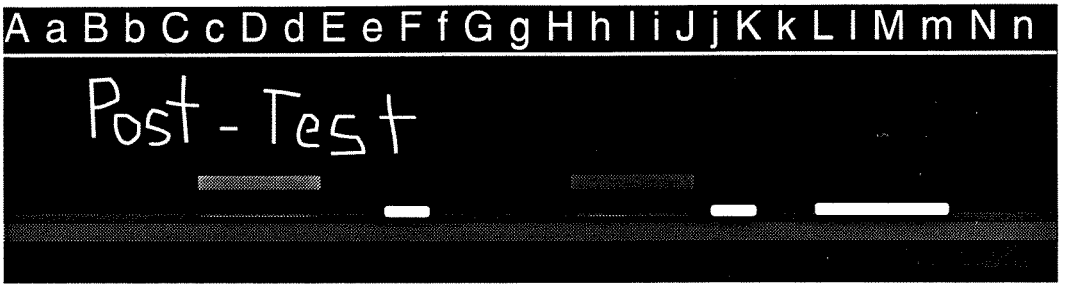

VI. Post-Test

Re-do the elements of the pre-test.

Answer Key

1. There are no set right and wrong ways to interpret for this segment. Compare your pre and post test interpretations for improvement in Classifier use. Analyze what factors led to more or less successful moments in the second interpretation.

2. True/False

a. False
b. False
c. True
d. True
e. False
f. False
g. False

3. All of the underlined areas in the following text are times when a Classifier can be used to indicate that object or verb action. Check your interpretation to see if you used signs or Classifier for each. Do the same for a transliterated message. Analyze your interpretation for factors that influenced Classifier use in the interpreting or transliterating process.

I was home the other night working in my kitchen. I had just gotten the pan down to cook a nice thick pork chop when my roommate came home. She had a friend with her and they went upstairs. I heard them talking in loud voices, but I ignored it. I set the table for my supper — place mat, plate, silverware, wine glass, slat and pepper. The cat kept jumping up on the counter and I kept tossing her on the floor again. I started chopping vegetables for a salad when I heard a door slam upstairs. The cat ran under the couch. My roommate's friend stomped down the stairs and out the front door. I heard her car start and peal off down the road. I waited for my roommate to come downstairs to talk, but she didn't. I sat and ate my dinner, the cat in my lap. Still no roommate. She never did come down that night. The next morning we passed each other in the bathroom and she acted like nothing had happened. I still don't know what the fight was all about.

VII. Bibliography and Recommended Additional Materials

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