



**Toward Effective Practice: Competencies of the Deaf Interpreter
Working Document**

NCIEC Deaf Interpreter Work Team

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Introduction

I love working with [a Deaf Interpreter]. There are concept constructions, linguistic and cultural modifications that I could never convey because of my being hearing. Finally, after so many tries on my own, I saw the light come on in the Deaf consumer. He finally had truly equal access to the system. – Hearing interpreter

A Deaf Interpreter is a specialist who provides interpretation and transliteration services, most commonly between a signed language and other visual and tactual communication forms used by individuals who are Deaf, Hard-of-Hearing, and Deaf-Blind; translation between a signed language and written texts; and interpretation between two signed languages. This document delineates the competencies required of the Deaf Interpreter based upon studies conducted by the National Consortium of Interpreter Education Centers (NCIEC). The delineation refers broadly to generic and specialty area competencies required of all interpreters, and then delves more deeply into the unique aptitudes, formative experiences, and competencies that differentiate Deaf Interpreters from their hearing counterparts.

Three NCIEC studies of current Deaf Interpreter practice inform this work: A national survey of 196 Deaf Interpreters conducted by the NCIEC in 2007 (NCIEC 2009c), six focus groups involving twenty-four working Deaf Interpreters from across the U.S. (NCIEC 2009a), and two focus groups including a total of twelve Deaf Interpreter educators (NCIEC 2009b). Key findings leading to the description of Deaf Interpreter competencies presented here are the following:

- Deaf Interpreters describe shared, formative “Deaf-World” experiences, that shape their ethics, establish their language and cultural fluency, and serve as the foundation for their training and development as interpreters.
- There is agreement among Deaf Interpreters and Deaf Interpreter educators of the need for core interpreting competencies as well as specialized training for particular settings.
- Deaf Interpreters work across the full gamut of community interpreting venues, but most commonly in social services, medical appointments, business meetings, VR/workplace, legal, and mental health settings where setting-specific knowledge and skill sets are required.
- Deaf Interpreters are most frequently called upon to interpret for Deaf monolingual ASL users with limited English proficiency; second most frequently, for individuals who are Deaf-Blind; and third most frequently, for consumers who have little or no language. It is often a challenge to determine and match the consumer’s interpretation needs.
- Most Deaf Interpreters work primarily in a combination of ASL and visual-gestural communication forms.

- Deaf Interpreters most commonly practice as a member of a team working with a hearing interpreter; only 29% report that they may work alone with certain consumers or in certain settings.
- Nearly half of all Deaf Interpreters provide sight translation between English print and ASL.
- It is common practice for Deaf Interpreters to employ strategies intended to engage the consumer, seek clarification, check comprehension, maintain focus, clarify context, and construct interpretation that is consistent with the experiential and linguistic framework of the consumer.
- Development of and participation in educational programming for Deaf Interpreters are critical for the future development of the Deaf Interpreter profession.

The NCIEC Deaf Interpreter Work Team comprising eight experts – Deaf Interpreters, educators, and researchers – developed the Competencies. Thirty colleagues offered diverse perspectives on earlier drafts. We believe this document captures the distinct knowledge and skills sets that the Deaf Interpreter brings to interpreted interactions. We intend that it be used as foundation for building curriculum for formal Deaf Interpreter preparation, as content for the education of hearing interpreters and the public on the process and benefits of working with Deaf Interpreters, and as the basis for developing testing content and procedures for credentialing of Deaf Interpreters.

Generalist Competencies

It was my first time having both Deaf and hearing interpreters in my meeting with the director of my halfway house. My body felt more relaxed and I could honestly express what I wanted to say. I felt good as I knew I could trust their work. – Deaf consumer

Domains and competencies of generalist practice are delineated in *Entry-to-Practice Competencies for ASL-English Interpreters* (2005). These include a variety of linguistic, interactional, interpersonal, cognitive, technical, academic, affective, and creative competencies and professional attributes that ensure effective performance in routine situations. The effective Deaf Interpreter possesses these interpreting competencies:

Theory and Knowledge Competencies: Academic foundation and world knowledge essential to effective interpretation

Human Relations Competencies: Interpersonal competencies fostering effective communication and productive collaboration with colleagues, consumers, and employers

Language Skills Competencies: Required levels of fluency in languages in which the interpreter works

Interpreting Skills Competencies: Effective interpretation of a range of subject matter in a variety of settings

Professionalism Competencies: Professional standards and practices

Specialty Area Competencies

My son had no language skills until he was placed in a basic skills program at the age of 20. After two years of study, he wanted me to meet him at the site with Deaf and hearing interpreters. It was the very first time I experienced hearing my son's voice through interpretation. My son revealed his thoughts and asked questions about his life experience for the first time. It was the most tearful moment of my life. – Hearing consumer

Deaf Interpreters who work in specialty areas of interpreting pursue and demonstrate a thorough understanding of institutional culture, demands, protocols and procedures, responsibilities, terminology, resources, legal and ethical mandates, competencies, and self-care strategies associated with any of those specialty areas in which s/he works.

Specialized Competencies of the Deaf Interpreter

I wanted to let you know that watching the [county court] hearing where [a Deaf Interpreter] relay interpreted was quite the eye-opening experience. It was interesting to watch [the interpreters] work together and has given me some insight into this more complex form of interpreting. There will be a relay situation in this county in the coming months with Spanish and an indigenous Mexican dialect. We now have a better idea of how we want to handle appearances. – Administrative Office of County Court

The following describes specialized Deaf Interpreter competencies extending beyond those expected of the generalist practitioner. The competencies are divided into four domains: Foundational, Language, Culture and Communication, Interpreting Practice, and Professional Development.

Foundational Competencies

As a Deaf person, the Deaf Interpreter starts with a distinct set of formative experiences described extensively by Deaf interpreter focus group participants (NCIEC 2009a). The formative experiences of Deaf interpreters include:

- Exposure to American Sign Language and/or another signed language, and a wide variety of other communication forms used by Deaf people through life-long interactions with Deaf

family members and friends, Deaf peers within the education system, and Deaf people in the community;

- Early experiences of interpreting for family, friends, and peers;
- Experiences of personal challenges in comprehending situations, interpreters, and various communication styles;
- Personal experiences of discrimination, oppression, and frustration with lack of access to communication and information.

Those Deaf individuals who become effective Deaf Interpreters are instilled by these life experiences with linguistic and extralinguistic knowledge (Gile, 1995) rarely, if ever, found in hearing interpreters. This requisite knowledge is an essential foundation that can be honed – though not taught – through interpreting education. The reader is encouraged to review the more in-depth description of Deaf Interpreter formative experiences provided in the analysis of Deaf Interpreter focus group discussions conducted April-July 2007 (NCIEC 2009a).

Language, Culture, and Communication Competencies

The Deaf Interpreter demonstrates the following language, culture, and communication competencies critical to effective interaction with the range of consumers with whom s/he may work:

1. Native or native-like competency in ASL, and/or a second signed language, including spontaneous use of pragmatic and sociolinguistic features of ASL, and/or a second signed language discourse including prosody, accent, transition markers, discourse markers, and turn taking;
2. Adeptness and flexibility in working across a range of registers, genres, and variations of ASL, and/or a second signed language, attributable to consumer's age, gender, ethnicity and cultural background, region, socioeconomic status, physical and cognitive health, and education levels;
3. Ability to recognize and negotiate cultural behaviors, values, mores, and discourse features and styles for effective communication;
4. Creativity and flexibility in the use of alternative visual communication strategies to convey complex concepts to consumers including drawing, mime, props, etc.;
5. Ability to read and write English for sight translation of standard forms and instructions (e.g. hospital admission, informed consent, job applications, insurance, billing) and written translation of the Deaf consumer's responses.
6. Ability to effectively explain and discuss the following concepts to a variety of stakeholders in an articulate, professional manner:

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- a. Process of consumer assessment and the rationale for using particular interpreting strategies and interventions;
- b. Roles, functions, and processes of the interpreting team;
- c. Rationale for the decision to use consecutive or simultaneous interpreting;
- d. Extent to which interpreters' linguistic negotiation and consumer language constraints may limit appropriate stakeholder use of portions of the interpretation.

Consumer Assessment Competencies

The Deaf Interpreter demonstrates the following competencies in determining appropriate interpreting and communication strategies with consumers:

1. Recognize educational, cognitive, physiological, and sociolinguistic factors and communication needs likely to influence interpretation strategies and communication interventions.
2. Identify Deaf consumers' language use (e.g. bilingual, monolingual, semi-lingual, familiarity with language(s) being used, communication system interference, international signs, use of culture-specific and idiosyncratic gestures or home signs, use of tactual communication, use of close-vision communication) to determine a target language/communication form.
3. Identify Deaf consumer's potential gaps (e.g. informational, experiential, educational, visual, protocol, cognitive, memory, cultural, or frame of reference) relative to the particular interaction or setting in order to determine a target language/communication strategy consistent with the experiential and linguistic framework of the Deaf consumer and appropriate to situational protocol.
4. Apply understanding of the history and significance of oppression in the Deaf community in analysis of power relationships among participants within the interpreted interaction in order to determine how the consumer's position within the power dynamic might influence interpreting decisions or strategies.

Interpreting Practice Competencies

The Deaf Interpreter demonstrates ability to use engagement, analytic, production, monitoring, and decision-making skills and strategies in the co-construction of meaningful interpretation for all consumers involved.

1. Engaging the Deaf consumer in the interpreting process in order to effect the most accurate and meaningful communication.

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2. Elicitation strategies to draw out information and seek clarification of meaning (e.g. prompting, probing, questioning, referencing previous comments, paraphrasing, verifying interpreter's comprehension of the Deaf consumer's message);
3. Contextual strategies to infer implied meaning and discern meaning in spite of production interference in such areas as sentence structures, pronominal reference, surrogate roles, reporting of events, description, use of tense and spatial reference;
4. Strategies to maintain Deaf consumer's focus on information relevant to the discourse (e.g. reiterating previous remark/question, making connections to earlier discussion, clarifying the point of remark/question).
5. Production strategies aimed at a target language/communication form consistent with the experiential and linguistic framework of the Deaf consumer including:
 - a. Adapting syntactic form (e.g. temporal sequencing, spatial representation, temporal referencing, pronominal referencing, constructed action, restructuring of question forms to narrow possible responses, adjusting register);
 - b. Managing flow of information (e.g. pacing, parsing of content);
 - c. Providing contextual information (e.g. visual description, linkages among concepts discussed, added redundancy, reframing, analogies, examples, definitions, cultural information, and explanation of situational protocol);
 - d. Monitoring consumer feedback to determine alternative modes of communication and other interventions (e.g. tactual communication, close-vision communication, international signs, adopting Deaf consumer's preferred signs, culture-specific or idiosyncratic gestures, and home signs, use of props, drawing, mime, etc.);
 - e. Seeking clarification from all parties involved concerning details as needed to accomplish above.
6. Demonstrate ability to recognize when stakeholders may use ancillary aspects or imprinted messages in ways that do not represent an intended consequence of the linguistic interaction (see Language, Culture, and Communication Foundations, 6d. above).
7. Demonstrate ability to monitor interaction to determine whether interpreting is effective; determine when it might be appropriate to stop the proceedings and offer appropriate alternative resources.
8. Identify, recognize, and differentiate roles as an interpreter and as an advocate including boundaries expected within the profession and the Deaf community.
9. When working as a team with a hearing interpreter, demonstrate ability to effectively negotiate aspects of the conjoint work with all parties involved:
 - a. Foster a collaborative interpreting process, working together to verify meaning, gather clarifying information, manage information flow within the team, and effect a mutual

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- monitoring process in the co-construction of complete and accurate interpretation for all consumers involved.
- b. Agree in advance with team interpreter on language use, techniques and strategies for routine and complex interpreting situations and how to adapt and change course as needed;
 - c. Agree in advance with team interpreter on the use of consecutive and/or simultaneous interpretation and management of switching between consecutive and simultaneous interpreting as needed;
 - d. Discuss in advance with team interpreter how to manage potential communication breakdowns between team members, including requesting for brief team conferences, adapting language use, techniques, strategies, and replacing members of the team, when necessary, in a professional manner;
 - e. Recognize and effectively navigate potential power dynamics (e.g. perceived roles, cultural disparities, discrimination, oppression, audism) within the team process.
 - f. When two or more teams are at work, plan how and when to switch so that each team will utilize and build upon existing linguistic concepts to keep the transition from one team to another linguistically clear to all consumers involved.

Professional Development Competencies
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The Deaf Interpreter demonstrates the following competencies aimed at continual development and enhancement of the Deaf Interpreter profession:

1. Pursue professional development activities that involve interaction with colleagues, peers and other professionals.
2. Actively encourage and participate in professional learning communities of Deaf Interpreters (e.g. meetings, workshops, conferences, virtual meeting rooms).
3. Keep abreast of current trends in interpretation, linguistics, cultural studies, and research.
4. Stay abreast of knowledge and current trends in a wide variety of subject areas (e.g., medical, mental health and legal) and any area in which the Deaf Interpreter may work.
5. Pursue educational and interpreting credentials.

Future Directions

When I work with a hearing team partner, I feel it is important to maintain an ongoing dialogue starting from pre-assignment and ending with post-assignment. This dialogue process helps us create a true partnership in our efforts to provide optimal interpretation. – Deaf Interpreter

This document should be used as the basis for many important and long-awaited initiatives in Deaf Interpreter education and practice:

- Development and implementation of a standardized curriculum, approach, and materials to training Deaf interpreters called for by Deaf Interpreter educators
- Development and implementation of Deaf Interpreter program screening mechanisms that can effectively determine whether candidates possess requisite foundational linguistic and extralinguistic knowledge
- Development and implementation of training modules on Deaf-Hearing team interpreting for use by interpreting education programs
- Development and implementation of educational opportunities for members of the Deaf, Hard-of-Hearing, and Deaf-Blind communities on the use of Deaf Interpreters and on careers as Deaf Interpreters
- Development and implementation of public education materials on the use of Deaf Interpreters
- Development and implementation of appropriate credentialing processes for Deaf Interpreters measuring not only general interpreting knowledge but also distinctive Deaf Interpreter competencies
- Development and implementation of research protocols for gathering work of Deaf Interpreter work in action aimed at verification and further specification of Deaf Interpreter competencies.

Resources

To find myriad resources on Deaf Interpreter practice including an annotated bibliography of print and video works, case studies, training and networking opportunities, subscribe to the Deaf Interpreter Institute online at <http://www.diinstitute.org>.

The National Consortium of Interpreter Education Centers website offers access to information on effective practices in mentoring, healthcare interpreting, legal interpreting, interpreting via

video, and Deaf self-advocacy, all applicable to the work of the Deaf Interpreter. Studies of interpreting needs from several perspectives are also available. Visit <http://www.nciec.org>.

For in-depth information on healthcare (medical and mental health) interpreting relevant to interpreters, providers, and consumers, visit <http://www.healthcareinterpreting.org>.

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