

Language Proficiency Expectations for Entry to & Exit from Interpreting Preparation Programs
Conference of Interpreter Trainers (CIT)
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Position Paper: Language Fluency Expectations for Interpreter Education Programs

There are significant and fundamental differences between learning to communicate and learning to interpret. The primary focus of language learning in post-secondary settings is to achieve a level of fluency whereby one can communicate with people who use the language. Fluency for interpreting is far more expansive than communicating with users. Interpreters need to achieve a level of fluency in multiple domains, such as the world of work, or the world of education, in order to recognize the extent and variety of language functions in both languages. Interpreters have to know, for example, how actions are described, how people organize and express ideas, how stories are told, how to persuade and many more functions.

The primary focus of an interpreting education consists of learning how a vast array of communicative skills can be used to construct similar meanings in each working language. In order to do this, learners must first be able to participate fully and effectively in conversations on a variety of topics in formal and informal settings from both concrete and abstract perspectives in each working language. They must be able to explain complex matters in detail, to provide lengthy and coherent narratives, to present opinions on a number of issues, such as political and social issues, and provide structured arguments to support these opinions. Then, and only then, are they ready to learn to interpret.

Interpreter Education programs typically accept students who have no previous experience with American Sign Language (ASL) or its users, thus making the first two years of study language learning, rather than interpreting studies. Likewise, they often provide no further preparation in advanced language use for students in their first language(s). Although the goal of IEPs is to graduate students who can interpret accurately and appropriately in professional and work-related settings, it is common knowledge that most students are not fully competent for professional practice in either language when they graduate.

It is time for programs who profess to teach interpreting skills to acknowledge that entering students should have a high level of mastery in the two (or more) main languages the program is preparing them to work with, in the US that will typically be ASL and English. This means that programs who purport to teach interpreting must institute high fluency requirements for both entry to and exit from these programs. To this end, we make the following recommendations:

	Entry Level	Exit Level
Language 1* (L1)	ASLTA/ACTFL Level: Advanced Mid to High <i>(adapted for all languages)</i>	ASLTA/ACTFL Level: Superior

	Or (<i>For all languages</i>): CEFR Level C1	Or CEFR Level C2
Language 2 (L2)	ASLTA/ACTFL Level: Advanced Low to Mid Or CEFR Level B2	ASLTA/ACTFL Level: Superior Or CEFR Level C1

*Native or first language, including, but not limited to ASL, Black ASL; Mainstream English. Black English; Mexican Sign Language, Spanish, and/or any other first language)

Recommending these standards brings sign language interpreting programs into the wider world of modern languages and translation and interpreting programs in colleges and universities around the US and Canada. It is for these reasons that the Conference of Interpreter Trainers recommends establishing these language proficiency levels for both entry and exit into interpreting programs of study.

Extended Rationale & ACTFL/CEFR Levels Descriptions:

We recommend the American Sign Language Teacher Association’s National Standards (ASLTA) which are linked to the American Council for Teaching Foreign Languages (ACTFL) standards because they are current and inclusive, based on descriptive, not prescriptive criteria, and well-researched with the input of many stakeholders. Choosing the ASLTA Standards which are linked to ACTFL standards includes ASL with other languages such as Spanish, French, and others so they can compete for university resources on a fairly level playing field. As long as ASL programs are not aligned with other language programs they are left to ask for money as something ‘special/different’ and outside the norms of other language programs. Implementing the existing ASLTA/ACTFL guidelines would go a long way toward leveling the playing field for ASL programs. We also recommend that these ASLTA standards be expanded and adapted to apply to all languages and dialects, such as Black ASL, Hispanic ASL, etc., if they are used; or that the ACTFL standards be used.

In addition, we recommend the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) standards because they provide L1/L2 descriptions of language proficiency and can be applied to both signed and spoken languages. CEFR’s descriptions are plainly worded, and supported by research from language researchers around the world. CEFR’s descriptors are objective, and avoid biased words like “error,” “misunderstanding,” and “confusion.” CEFR’s ratings are based on observed performance of language use. Moreover, CEFR standards can be used with or compared to ASLTA/ACTFL standards as well as adapted to dialects and varieties of both spoken and signed languages, such as Black English, Hispanic English, Mexican Sign language, Black ASL, etc.

It is our responsibility to offer interpreting students opportunities to achieve high levels of fluency in both ASL and English, as well as other varieties, that they might interpret accurately, appropriately, and competently across a spectrum of people, places and purposes. In order to achieve this goal, prospective interpreters must first be able to demonstrate a high level of fluency prior to entering into interpreting studies programs. As educators, it is our responsibility to clearly and explicitly define effective language pre-requisites, share them with

both consumers and students, and to evaluate them prior to entry into interpreting studies. Until interpreting educators acknowledge that high levels fluency are a primary pre-requisite to the study of interpreting, we are failing all our stakeholders.

From: **Appendix 5: Comparison of Proficiency Ratings: CEFR/ACTFL**

CEFR		ACTFL	
C2	<p>Can understand with ease virtually all [signed] texts.</p> <p>Can express him/herself spontaneously, very fluently and precisely, differentiating nuances of meaning even in more complex situations.</p> <p>Can summarise information from different sources and reconstruct arguments and accounts in a coherent presentation.</p>	Superior	<p>Communicate with accuracy and fluency in order to participate fully and effectively in conversations on a variety of topics in formal and informal settings from both concrete and abstract perspectives. They discuss their interests and special fields of competence, explain complex matters in detail, and provide lengthy and coherent narrations, all with ease, fluency, and accuracy. They present their opinions on a number of issues of interest to them, such as social and political issues, and provide structured arguments to support these opinions. They are able to construct and develop hypotheses to explore alternative possibilities.</p>
C1	<p>Can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognise implicit meaning.</p> <p>Can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes.</p> <p>Can express him/herself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions.</p> <p>Can produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organisational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices.</p>	Advanced	<p>Can engage in conversation in a clearly participatory manner in order to communicate information on autobiographical topics, as well as topics of community, national, or international interest. The topics are handled concretely by means of narration and description in the major times frames of past, present, and future. Can also deal with a social situation with an unexpected complication. Speakers have sufficient control of basic structures and generic vocabulary to be understood by native speakers of the language, including those unaccustomed to non-native speech.</p>

CEFR		ACTFL	
B2	<p>Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation.</p> <p>Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native/proficient signers quite possible without strain for either party.</p> <p>Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.</p>	Intermediate	<p>Speakers at the Intermediate level are distinguished primarily by their ability to create with the language when talking about familiar topics related to their daily life. They are able to recombine learned material in order to express personal meaning. Intermediate-level speakers can ask simple questions and can handle a straightforward survival situation. They produce sentence-level language, ranging from discrete sentences to strings of sentences, typically in present time. Intermediate-level speakers are understood by interlocutors who are accustomed to dealing with non-native learners of the language.</p>
B1	<p>Can understand the main points when clear, standard language [which for sign language users may be a locally used variation] is used and the topics are familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc.</p> <p>Can deal with most situations likely to arise where the sign language is used.</p> <p>Can produce simple connected text on topics, which are familiar, or of personal interest.</p> <p>Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes and ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.</p>		

