



## **Toward Effective Practice: Competencies of the Deaf Interpreter**

NCIEC Deaf Interpreter Work Team

Working Document Published April 2010

Revised June 2010

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The National Consortium of Interpreter Education Centers is funded from 2005 – 2010 by the U.S. Department of Education RSA CFDA #84.160A and B, Training of Interpreters for Individuals Who Are Deaf and Individuals Who Are Deaf-Blind.

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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.

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- 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 five 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

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>.

### Glossary

audism	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Prejudice or discrimination based on the sense of hearing; especially discrimination against D/deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals.</li><li>2. Behavior, conditions, or attitudes that foster stereotypes of individual or social roles based on hearing loss. (Lane, 1993). <a href="http://www.thetactilemind.com">http://www.thetactilemind.com</a> (Witter-Merithew &amp; Johnson 2005).</li></ol>
bilingual	<p>A bilingual person is, in its broadest definition, anyone with communicative skills in two languages, be it active or passive. In a narrow definition, the term bilingual is often reserved for those speakers with native or native-like proficiency in two languages.</p> <p><a href="http://www.wordiq.com/definition/Bilingual">http://www.wordiq.com/definition/Bilingual</a> (Witter-Merithew &amp; Johnson 2005).</p>
competency	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Areas of personal capability that enable people to perform successfully in their jobs by completing tasks effectively. A competency can be knowledge, attitude, skill, value, or personal value. Competency can be acquired through talent, experience, or training.</li><li>2. Competency comprises the specification of knowledge and skill and the application of that knowledge and skill to the standard of performance required in employment.</li></ol> <p><a href="http://www.neiu.edu/~dbehrlic/hrd408/glossary.htm">http://www.neiu.edu/~dbehrlic/hrd408/glossary.htm</a> (Witter-Merithew &amp; Johnson 2005).</p>
co-construction of meaning	<p>Refers to the notion that, as meaning has no objective existence, the interpreter makes meaning through a dynamic interplay with her interlocutors (i.e. team interpreters and consumers). For further discussion on meaning construction, the reader is referred to Shaffer and Wilcox (2005) and Janzen (2005).</p>
consecutive interpretation	<p>The interpreter gives his interpretation after the speaker has finished a segment of his speech that may be a sentence or several sentences. (Seleskovitch, 1978). (Witter-Merithew &amp;</p>

	Johnson 2005).
International signs	International Sign Language is a constructed sign language, which the World Congress of the World Federation of the Deaf originally discussed in 1951. In 1973, a committee created and standardized a system of international signs. They tried to choose the most understandable signs from diverse sign languages to make the language easy to learn. ( <a href="http://www.deafnix.com/ASL/gestuno.html">http://www.deafnix.com/ASL/gestuno.html</a> ).
interpretation	The process of conveying a message generated in one language into an equivalent message in another language. (Witter-Merithew & Johnson 2005).
monolingual	1. a person who knows only one language 2. monolingual - using or knowing only one language ( <a href="http://www.thefreedictionary.com/monolingual">http://www.thefreedictionary.com/monolingual</a> ).
semi-lingual	One of several [terms] that describe the language profile of Deaf people who generally possess a small vocabulary and produce incorrect grammar, and whose language production is not automatic. Some other labels that have been used are “minimal language skills”, “limited general knowledge” or “highly visual language”...The communication of a semilingual Deaf person may sometimes also be referred to as “survival communication”, meaning that this person’s limited communication enables her to get what she needs, but not much more. It should be noted here that it is very important for us to be able to refer to the Deaf person’s linguistic status or communication abilities humanely and with respect and not by assigning denigrating labels (Boudreault 2005).
sight translation	The oral [or signed] rendition of a written text from one language into another. (Adapted from National Association of Judicial Interpreters and Translators: (Adapted from National Association of Judicial Interpreters and Translators website: <a href="http://www.najit.org/Publications/Terms%20of%20the%20Profession.pdf">http://www.najit.org/Publications/Terms%20of%20the%20Profession.pdf</a> ).
simultaneous interpretation	Conveys a message into another language at virtually the same moment in time as it is expressed in the first language. (Seleskovitch, 1978). (Witter-Merithew & Johnson 2005).
tactual communication	A process in which signed communication is received through touch rather than visually. (Smith 2002)
target language	The language into which a message is interpreted.

(Humphrey & Alcorn 1998).

transliteration	Transliteration has traditionally been defined for the speaking-signing context, e.g. "...working between spoken English and a form of a signed language that uses a more English-based word order" (RID 1997/2007), that is, same language, adapted for the visual mode. We suggest that the term may be applied to the Deaf Interpreter's work in describing the process of working from a signed language source to the same signed language target, adapted for the tactual mode, as with Deaf-Blind consumers.
visual-gestural communication	This term has been used broadly to encompass both signed languages and gesture. For our purposes, visual-gestural communication refers to the creative use of gestures, conventional signs, body language, and facial expressions to construct a message.

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