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## The Role of Deaf Interpreters: Lessons from the past and a vision for the future

Judy Shepard-Kegl, Fred McKinley, and Debra Reynolds  
University of Southern Maine, Portland, Maine

The role of Deaf interpreters in the United States has been defined and redefined slowly over several decades. We have only recently begun to appreciate and make use of this valuable resource that can bring the quality and consistency of interpretation services into parity with that which is expected in the spoken language interpreting profession. Danica Seleskovitch (1978) emphasized the best practices of conference interpreters to include only interpreting into their native (A) language. Phyllis Wilcox (1995) pointed out that the field of signed language interpreting is the only one where interpreters are regularly interpreting into their non-native (B) language. Spoken language interpreters have, for decades, teamed with other interpreters to form [A>B]-[B>A] teams to assure native language output in the target languages. The field of signed language interpreting has only recently begun to be held to this higher standard of performance.

**History.** A look at the history of Certified Deaf Interpreters (CDIs) highlights this gradual awakening. In the 1970s, the primary purpose of certified Deaf interpreters was typically limited to serving on evaluation teams to assess and certify interpreters who could hear. In the 1980s, Deaf interpreters were called in on an “as needed” basis for work with primarily “minimally language skilled” individuals who required communication in a hybrid system between signs and gestures as well as deaf-blind individuals who frequently utilize one-on-one interpretation where the interpreter mirrors the communication to a large group. By the early 1990s Deaf interpreters were more frequently called in to team with hearing interpreters in legal settings, again for individuals with limited language skills. By the turn of the millennium, the role and function of the CDI was greatly expanded to include theatrical work, international sign interpretation at conferences, and platform interpreting for audiences with native signers wanting native level interpretation that matched register, affect and cultural perspective. On a more consistent basis, consumers of ASL interpreting services who request Deaf interpreters have been able to receive a message in their native language without having to reinterpret in their heads from second-language signed interpretation of ASL to native ASL.

**Expanding the scope.** Currently in our state (and a few others) CDIs are also teaming in the classroom with educational interpreters, working alone or in Deaf/Deaf teams as interpreters between second language signing service providers and consumers, and are teaming with novice interpreters in a variety of contexts where a premium is placed upon native output in both the spoken and signed target languages.

**Future visions.** It can be argued that we still have a long way to go. We can envision a time when the requirement for provision of native-level services is widespread and

Deaf/Hearing teams become the norm. Meanwhile, we foresee a time when certified-level services become the baseline and all pre-certified interpreters team with Deaf interpreters to provide balanced ASL/English interpretation. Currently interpreters in the gap between interpreter training programs and achievement of national credentials are often sent alone to “easy” assignments, typically one-on-one meetings where the Deaf consumers speak for themselves. Regular teaming with both hearing and Deaf professionals at an early point in an interpreter’s career would provide added growth and experience with every assignment and allow beginning interpreters to stretch their wings (in a way that is safe for consumers) and tackle more and more complex assignments. Our ultimate vision of native level interpreting is one where Deaf interpreters would be working as regularly as hearing interpreters, as opposed to the current situation where most Deaf interpreters are not hired frequently enough to make a living in our profession.

***The catalyst to change.*** The catalyst to change at each step in the redefinition of the role and function of Deaf interpreters has come from members of the Deaf community. First, Deaf interpreters themselves questioned the limitation of their role to being evaluators of interpreting tests and advocated for their right to work as interpreters. Later, in an interpreting conference called the “Allies Conference” (Nashua, NH, 1996) the policy of using ASL as the common language choice was firmly established. All participants, hearing and Deaf, were expected to use ASL in order that all aspects of the conference from lectures to social events would be fully accessible. In the course of these meetings, Deaf interpreters began requesting native level interpreting services, which entailed the use of Deaf interpreters to take the second-language ASL output of hearing participants and change it to native ASL. Slowly, the realization that one can expect native-level services in a wide range of interpreting contexts has begun to sink in.

Because of the initial restriction of Deaf interpreters to working with individuals who exhibit limited language skills, a stigma had been attached to requesting Deaf interpreters. Deaf consumers felt that asking for a Deaf interpreter was equivalent to admitting an ASL deficiency. Slowly, as a direct result of Deaf interpreters themselves demanding native language services, the realization that Deaf/Hearing teams can offer native level interpretation to all Deaf consumers has begun to take hold. Slowly more and more Deaf consumers are requesting Deaf interpreters and more and more hearing interpreters are requesting Deaf team members.

***Impediments to change.*** There are still a few roadblocks to the full integration of Deaf interpreters into our profession. The decision of whether a Deaf interpreter is needed still remains for the most part in the hands of hearing interpreters. The typical scenario proceeds as follows: a hearing interpreter or hearing team is assigned to a particular job and upon meeting the consumer, or over the course of the assignment, it becomes clear that the services of a CDI would be desirable. The interpreter either copes as best he or she can through the assignment and makes a note for future consideration, or the interpreter informs consumers that the interpretation cannot proceed without a Deaf interpreter and the meeting is rescheduled. Either way, the Deaf consumer is inconvenienced. Had the involvement of a Deaf interpreter been established proactively, such situations would not arise.

***Infrastructures supporting the use of Deaf interpreters.*** In Maine, we are lucky to have a director of an interpreter referral agency and referral specialist who is herself a certified Deaf interpreter. Having a Deaf interpreter involved in the referral process increases the possibility that more assignments will be staffed with Deaf interpreters. In Maine, it is standard practice, for example, to send a Deaf interpreter on any legal assignment where Deaf consumers in police custody are to be advised of their constitutional rights to a lawyer and to avoid self-incrimination. However, it is still not the case that a Deaf interpreter in the State can expect full-time employment in an interpreter role.

***Training.*** To achieve the paradigm shift needed to move to provision of native-level interpreting services, training is essential. Currently there are too few Deaf interpreters to fill the needs of our vision. Nationally, there are only 37 deaf interpreters holding the CDI (Certified Deaf Interpreter) credentials. There are others holding the older RSC certification, but the combined total is less than 100 individuals. With over 4,000 certified interpreters nationwide, training of more Deaf interpreters is crucial to this vision. On the flip side, without this vision training of more Deaf interpreters will lead to an even larger under-utilized work force that is drawn upon only in the rarest of instances.

Our program in Maine is the only one designed from the start to serve both Deaf and hearing interpreting students in all classes in the curriculum and to encourage the teaming of Deaf and hearing interpreters on all levels. Other programs throughout the U.S. have trained Deaf interpreters in the context of a program designed for hearing interpreters, and yet other have set up as series of weekend or concentrated programs designed specifically for Deaf interpreters. Each choice has its own set of pros and cons.

There will always be a language discrepancy between interpreters for whom ASL or English is their native language and those for whom these are second languages. There are also cultural differences in terms of classroom style and etiquette that need to be handled in mixed classes. Mixed classes will always move more slowly than classes comprised of only native speakers/signers. Our program feels that solving these issues in the classroom context is just one more part of preparing Deaf and hearing interpreters to team with each other. We do offer one intensive summer class that is limited to Deaf interpreting students only and prepares Deaf interpreters to take the national CDI exam. The speed and amount of content transmitted in this context is staggering and speaks to the possibilities offered in programs where one receives training in one's native language, but, except in unique classes like this that are relevant only to Deaf participants, there is a trade off in terms of reduced time in the task-appropriate experiences of working together in teams.

Skills and experiences at entry to interpreter training classes differs among our Deaf and hearing students. Hearing interpreting students must enter having completed four levels of ASL language training and a beginning-intermediate level introduction to interpreting course. Deaf interpreting students typically enter into our intermediate level hands on interpreting course, *Consecutive Interpreting and Deaf/Hearing Teams* and then

backtrack into the introduction course, getting a taste of the experience of being in interpreter role before tackling the more content oriented introduction courses. This serves to even the playing field between book-learned information on models and ethics and language skills, while students experience the interpreting process for the first time. Our goal is to produce hearing interpreters who will advocate for the use of Deaf interpreters as often as possible and to produce Deaf interpreters who can team effectively and can work with a wide range of interpreters to produce an interpreting product that native-signers can receive without doing further interpretation in their own heads. We teach that the [A>B]-[B>A] teaming model is the default unless an interpreter has A level skills in both languages that they interpret between. Furthermore, Deaf team member are given training to serve as the lead interpreter in terms of meeting with consumers and negotiating set up and process for the team to function most efficiently. If roles are reversed, the hearing team member will need to leave the Deaf member out of the loop or to sign and talk at the same time, which is inadvisable.

We have learned over time that no one approach to interpreter training can best serve the needs of all students involved. There are certain specific bodies of information and practical experience that are unique to the needs of Deaf versus hearing interpreting students. Over the past year, USM has developed a mentoring program for working interpreters that begins with guided self-assessment of one's work, followed by a series of one-on-one process mediations, where a protégé examines a piece of work or problem solves with the guidance of a mentor. This particular protégé-centered approach to looking at one's work has proven very successful with Deaf protégés, allowing them to take the process where they need to go. In so doing, we have been able to better understand the interpreting process from a Deaf interpreter's perspective, to tailor training materials to their unique needs, and to begin a dialogue on process as well as ethics that is refining and broadening our perspective on the interpreting process in general.

Our hope is that as you embark on your own process of involving Deaf interpreters in the profession that you can learn from our short-sightedness in the past and embrace a vision where collaboration with Deaf interpreters can raise us to a new level of quality services and culturally sensitive professionalism in the field.

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