



Language Equity: Working with Deaf Interpreters

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Sign language interpreting is often perceived as *hearing*¹ interpreters providing access for Deaf and hard of hearing individuals. In reality, Deaf and hard of hearing individuals are not the sole beneficiaries of sign language interpreting services; interpreters are there to serve hearing individuals also. Interpreters are a critical element in connecting modalities — visual and auditory — between different languages. Traditionally, this communication between spoken and signed languages has been deemed as a binary concept, when in reality it has evolved into a multidimensional concept.

Adding to the challenge is that as many as 87-89% of hearing interpreters are not native sign language users (Mapson, 2014; National Consortium Interpreter Education Center [NCIEC], 2014). An informal survey revealed that out of over 800 hearing members of CASLI (formerly Association of Visual Language in Canada (AVLIC)), only 19 were native signers (Read, 2018). In comparison, spoken language interpreters are usually evenly spread between native and non-native speakers. The field of sign language interpreting has evolved considerably in the past two decades with a large body of research. CASLI acknowledges that the existing model of a hearing interpreter as a provider and a Deaf person as a consumer does not accurately represent current equity frameworks on fully accessible communication to all.

¹Hearing people: Refers to individuals who are not deaf or hard of hearing.

The Landscape of the Canadian Deaf Community

First and foremost, the Accessible Canada Act of 2019 recognizes these sign languages: American Sign Language (ASL), Quebec Sign Language/*Langue des Signes Québécoise* (LSQ), and Indigenous Sign Languages, and in the Canadian Deaf community along with different dialects and foreign sign languages. This multilingualism/plurilingualism demonstrates the significant range of linguistic, cultural, and sensory experiences based on their upbringings, education, social backgrounds, and language acquisition, which creates a wide range of communication repertoire.

Second, between 90% and 95% of Deaf individuals have hearing parents, many of whom do not know any form of sign language. This results in a large number of the Deaf community being linguistically deprived during their formative language years, a crucial time for language acquisition. This language deprivation leads to the lack of readily available *and* accessible literacy in a traditional sense — reading and writing — among Deaf individuals.

Third, language deprivation is a direct consequence of home and educational settings where Deaf people are subjected to curriculum gaps and limited interaction with educators who are fluent signers and intricately cognizant of cultural and linguistic aspects. Most curricula are not widely available in sign language, nor are they linguistically and culturally appropriate or accessible. This creates a lower rate of academic achievement and literacy among Deaf populations, often heightened by assessments administered by individuals equally not culturally competent in culture or linguistic matters.

Fourth, Deaf persons engaging with the world at large creates a multilingual, multicultural, and multimodal experience. Deaf people's communication strategies are considerably broad and may be multiple-faceted: sign language, gestures, home signs, spoken language, written language, drawing, body language, and/or other strategies. Hearing interpreters, regardless of how fluent they are, are often not prepared or trained to handle such a diverse array of communication approaches and experiences.

Finally, a large portion of the Deaf community experiences lower socioeconomic statuses stemming from higher levels of unemployment and underemployment than the national average. This is often the byproduct of systemic discrimination, inaccessibility, and disempowerment in the workplace and at large.

Evolution and Definition of *Deaf Interpreter*

The Deaf interpreter (DI) is a skilled, fluent communication expert who is Deaf and has mastered various sets of crucial skills to ensure the best communication access. Their sensory and life experiences complement all types of communication settings.

The first known instances of DIs were informal, but essential: Deaf individuals provided communicative support through social interaction, side conversations in the classroom, and within community settings. Deaf interpreters have long acted as “language brokers” to fill communication gaps in informal settings (social events, in classrooms, or with hearing people) but only recently have they achieved full-fledged professional status within CASLI (Boudreault, 2005). A considerable body of research and literature on DIs has emerged since the late 1990s, increasing understanding of a DI’s roles and functions for both Deaf and hearing parties.

Rationale for Hiring Deaf Interpreters

Given the various scenarios that interpreters — Deaf or hearing — encounter daily, DIs have proven through real-life application that they can ensure the most accurate message equivalence across multilingual, multicultural, and multimodal approaches. Their unique sensory experiences, compared to hearing interpreters, provide an additional layer of messaging and cultural affirmation that creates an optimal communication experience.

A DI further ensures that a visual conceptualization of information is most ideal, steering away from literal translations between spoken language and signed language while immediately decoding all possible micromessages found within verbal and non-verbal cues.

DIs bring distinct expertise and experience to each interpreted interaction, usually in equal partnership with hearing interpreters, to provide full, top-quality, and appropriate communication access.

Cultural identification and shared experiences of being Deaf plays an essential role for the DI in the success of each communication process.

Ultimately, involving DIs reduces the likelihood of mis-interpreting, missing critical nuanced messages, misunderstanding intent, and the accompanying potential liability during the communication process.

Additionally, the effects of linguistic and cultural trauma in speech-dominant societies experienced by many Deaf individuals can severely hinder full comprehension of a message when traditionally interpreted.

Functions of the Deaf Interpreter in the Field

Adam (2013) stated that DIs are not limited to translating between two languages or other communication methods. Rather, a DI performs multilayered functions while primarily serving as a way to reduce further trauma and/or potential communication breakdowns among both hearing and Deaf consumers. This is especially key in highly sensitive situations such as legal, mental health, assessment, medical, social work, criminal, and even individualized education plans (IEPs) for minors. Such situations often involve decisions that lead to significant impacts upon people's lives and mental well-being. Potential scenarios that involve DIs include:

- Working with atypical users who may have difficulties in expressing and/or understanding information as a result of cognitive challenges, temporary or permanent physical incapacity, linguistically impoverished or deprivation, and/or aging.
- Serving as a platform interpreter for one or multiple sign languages (international or within a country with several official languages) at conferences and events.
- Working with refugees or immigrants who use different languages or means of communication.
- Working with DIs who are Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC), LGBTQ2S+ or local residents of specific regions; who identify and connect by common experiences and dialects.
- Providing close-vision, tactile, ProTactile, or other types of interpreting to DeafBlind individuals.
- Working with minors in legal and educational settings involving sensitive topics.
- Working with minors and adults in medical settings where they may be incoherent or affected by surgeries or medication.
- Providing platform or virtual interpreting for emergency and official public broadcasts.
- Working with hearing interpreters in video relay service settings and virtual, eg: webinars, livestream events, workshops, etc.
- Translating textual content to sign language in real-time (often without a hearing interpreter present).
- Developing and translating multilingual content in sign language for education and public access.

- Working with real-time captioning or automatic-to-text captioning to provide on-site interpretation from the text to sign language without audio.
- Alleviating the insufficient fluency or training often found among hearing interpreters for specific situations, helping close gaps to achieve successful communication access.

Professional Status of the Deaf Interpreter

DIs certainly have demonstrated clear access to equitable communication for all accountable parties in diverse settings and situations. Furthermore, DIs further Canadian society's commitment to ensuring that every citizen has full access to communication regardless of linguistic, cultural, and educational background. CASLI affirms that DIs are part of our professional associations and are considered on par with their hearing counterparts. CASLI endorses the collaborative interpreting model for hearing and Deaf professionals to achieve optimal and accurate messaging, although DIs can also work solo. All DIs should abide by CASLI's Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Professional Conduct.

Resource: <https://diinstitute.org>

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