



South Carolina

EDUCATIONAL INTERPRETING CENTER

Why Educational Interpreter Credentials are Vital

White Paper

Interpreting requires far more than being able to use sign language. While *sign language proficiency needs to be at a high level* (Moser-Mercer, 1997), educational interpreting requires at its core a three-step process. The educational interpreter must be able to decode and comprehend a complex source language message, extract its meaning, and reformulate that into an equally complex target language message (Cokely, 1992; Fitzmaurice, 2017; Frishberg, 1990; Gile, 1995; Moser-Mercer, 1997; Russell, 2005; Seleskovitch, 1978). While sign fluency affects overall job performance (Hurwitz, 1991), this fluency is only the *entrance* requirement to being able to interpret (Janzen, 2005).

Simply being bilingual does not guarantee an effective interpretation – particularly when an interpreter is working simultaneously (listening to one language while at the same time producing another language). This process takes a long time to learn -undergraduate programs require four years of full-time study in addition to seeking out interpreting credentials.

Educational Interpreting

Interpreting for Deaf adults is very different than interpreting for Deaf children ([National Association for Interpreters in Education](#), 2019). Deaf adults have fully formed language, can comprehend the nuance of the situation, and are most often in settings where they do not need to acquire new vocabulary, new social skills or develop their literacy. Deaf adults have the maturity and language ability to self-advocate and seek clarification as needed and are rarely assessed on their understanding of the content by way of a test at the end of the interpretation.

Quite simply educational interpreters' jobs are very different than those of community interpreters. Schools do not just teach the content curriculum; they also foster growth in language and social-emotional development (Schick, Williams & Kupermintz, 2005). Interpreting in educational settings focuses on conveying main ideas, clear directions, solicitations for student participation, situated learning and scaffolded learning is being conveyed effectively. All the while ensuring Deaf students are empowered to learn new vocabulary and concepts, so much so, they can be assessed on that vocabulary and concept in their second language (English).

In addition, we must remember most Deaf students enter the school system with impoverished language (Cerney, 2007) which severely impacts reading comprehension, mental health, social development, and cognitive development (Friedman & Rusoe, 2015; Hall et al., 2019; Cheng et al., 2019; Hall, 2017; Cerney, 2007). Suffice to say interpreting 5th grade content to someone with limited vocabulary is extremely challenging.

In 2003, the [National Association of State Directors of Special Education](#) representative concluded “achievement is limited when students do not have access to qualified interpreters” (Johnson, 2004). An unqualified educational interpreter is often a hidden problem as very few people are likely to enter the classroom with the skills to evaluate the work of the interpreter and the goal of integrating deaf and hard-of-hearing students into the LRE “becomes a mockery” (Commission on Education of the Deaf, 1988, p.103).

Interpreter Evaluations

Founded in 1964, the [Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf](#) (RID) has been the historic organization representing the interests of interpreters working with Deaf people. Part of that mission was to provide Sign Language to English interpreter certification. Over the years there have been many [different certifications and iterations](#) therein – particularly as RID began recognizing other certifications from other entities.

At the time of this writing, the [Center for the Assessment of Sign Language Interpretation](#) (CASLI) provides evaluations for national certification of community-based interpreters. The aim is to provide a “standard of effectiveness in the sign language interpreting profession. It demonstrates to employers, customers, and peers that the individual has achieved a rigorous baseline level of knowledge, skills, and experience” (RID, 2023). Nationally certified interpreters are then required to accrue [Continuing Education Units](#) (CEUs) to maintain their national certification. The written and interview and performance exams are developed with adult language users in a variety of interpreting settings. For example, interpreting doctors’ appointments, applying for social assistance, job interviews, and meetings with colleagues, et cetera. Again, the CASLI National Interpreter Certification (NIC) examination recognized as national RID Certification is designed to assess interpreting effectiveness among adult Deaf populations and the scenarios they encounter not in a school setting.

The other major credential (popular in the western United States) is the [Texas Board for Evaluation of Interpreters Certification Program](#) (BEI). Like national certification, there is a written test of knowledge and an interpreting performance test. The Basic Test “focuses primarily on the language found in routine educational and social service settings, as determined by the empirical job analysis of incumbent Texas interpreters. Examples of possible topics include K–12 classroom presentations by students or teachers, special school assemblies, homework assignments, school memos, informational meetings or orientations, and so on.” ([Study Guide for Interpreter Certification Candidates](#), 2012, p. 48). BEI certified interpreters are also required to maintain CEUs. While this may be an acceptable credential for

educational interpreters in South Carolina, the test is only offered in Austin, Texas and does not have broad nationwide usage nor any empirical studies using this metric.

Since that time, educational interpreters have vacated their support of RID citing they are often misrepresented, educational interpreters from across the country established the [National Association for Interpreters in Education](#) (NAIE) in 2016 which promotes best practices and professional standards to ensure equitable access to education for deaf students. With ambassadors in many states and a significant amount of resources, the NAIE is the most widely known entity supporting interpreters working in an educational setting.

Educational Interpreter Performance Assessments

There is a fundamental difference between an evaluation as it is pass or fail and provides little guidance to candidates on what competencies they have achieved and which competencies they need to address. An assessment on the other hand, provides formative descriptions of performance at different levels. Assessments can be used as an evaluation, for example you must have a specific rubric score to pass the established minimum level. Assessments are often used in education settings – such as using rubrics as formative guidance with general comments, but students must achieve a specific number of points to pass the assignment.

Since there was a complete lack of credentialing for interpreters in educational settings (recall RID only evaluates adult settings) and knowing the work of a classroom interpreter is completely different, Schick and several colleagues (Schick, 1999) at Boys Town National Research Hospital developed the [Educational Interpreter Performance Assessment](#) (EIPA) using a federal Department of Education grant in the 1990's.

The EIPA is a well-researched, nationally used, psychometrically valid and reliable instrument, specifically designed to evaluate the two-way aspects of interpreting necessary to support language and cognitive development in elementary and secondary classroom settings (Schick & Williams, 1999, 2001). Educational Interpreter's samples are assessed using a standard Likert scale from zero (no skills) to five (advanced) against 38 specific competencies. The EIPA has a significant amount of support as the [nationwide, most accepted, recognized and required credential for educational interpreters](#). Further, given its empirical vigor, it is frequently used as a benchmark in research methodologies.

As an assessment, the EIPA is able to provide details of what interpreters at performance levels are able to do.

EIPA: 2.0-2.9 Basic

Demonstrates only basic sign vocabulary and these limitations interfere with communication.

Lack of fluency and sign production errors are typical and often interfere with communication.

The interpreter often hesitates in signing, as if searching for vocabulary. Frequent errors in

grammar are apparent, although basic signed sentences appear intact. More complex grammatical structures are typically difficult. Individual is able to read signs at the word level and simple sentence level, but complete or complex sentences often require repetitions and repairs. Some use of prosody and space, but use is inconsistent and often incorrect. **An individual at this level is not recommended for classroom interpreting.** Such interpreters have no bilingual abilities and need to spend significant time learning sign language.

EIPA 3.0-3.5 Intermediate

Demonstrates knowledge of basic vocabulary, but will lack vocabulary for more technical, complex, or academic topics. Individual is able to sign in a fairly fluent manner using some consistent prosody, but pacing is still slow with infrequent pauses for vocabulary or complex structures. Sign production may show some errors but generally will not interfere with communication. Grammatical production may still be incorrect, especially for complex structures, but is in general intact for routine and simple language. Comprehends signed messages but may need repetition and assistance. Voiced translation often lacks depth and subtleties of the original message. An individual at this level would be able to communicate **very basic classroom content** but may incorrectly interpret complex information resulting in a message that is not always clear. An interpreter at this level needs continued supervision and should be required to participate in continuing education in interpreting. *Interpreters at this level need professional development on basic interpreting skills.*

EIPA 3.6-3.9

Demonstrates broad use of vocabulary with sign production that is generally correct. Demonstrates good strategies for conveying information when a specific sign is not in her/his vocabulary. Grammatical constructions are generally clear and consistent, but complex information may still pose occasional problems. Prosody is good, with appropriate facial expression most of the time. May still have difficulty with the use of facial expression in complex sentences and adverbial non-manual markers. Fluency may deteriorate when rate or complexity of communication increases. Uses space consistently most of the time, but complex constructions or extended use of discourse cohesion may still pose problems. Comprehension of most signed messages at a normal rate is good but translation may lack some complexity of the original message. An individual at this level would be able to convey much of the classroom content but may have difficulty with complex topics or rapid turn taking. Interpreters at this level need professional development focusing on processing strategies etc.

And, educational interpreters achieving an **EIPA 4.0+** are able to effectively interpret most complex classroom topics and for our purposes would be considered highly qualified.

An educational interpreter with a skill profile around 3.0 or 3.5 is *still not providing complete access* to the information being conveyed. Schick & Williams (2004) report that such interpreters are making numerous errors, omissions and distortions in his or her interpretation.

In fact, Cates and Delkamiller (2021) found deaf students using educational interpreters with an EIPA 3.0 *could not exhibit any learning*. Without the ability to interpret well enough for a Deaf student to learn means the Deaf student is not receiving a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE). Access and learning are only optimized for Deaf students with an educational interpreter with an EIPA 4.0+ (Cates & Delkamiller, 2021; Johnson, Taylor, Schick, Brown & Bolster, 2018; National Association of Interpreters in Education, 2019).

Unfortunately, many interpreters performing at less than an EIPA 3.5 do not adequately realize they are not providing access (Fitzmaurice, 2017, 2020). In other words, such educational interpreters are not able to self-assess their work and make an effective determination on the efficacy of that interpretation. Hence the need for an external evaluation or credentialing.

Hiring Educational Interpreters

There is a rich history of hiring individuals who claim they are bilingual in sign language and English and hiring them without appropriately vetting their interpreting skills. Many districts rely on the Teacher of the Deaf to sit in on the interview and make such determinations of interpreting skills. In South Carolina [Teacher of the Deaf certification](#) requires no meaningful study of sign language or any demonstration of sign language fluency by instruments such as the [American Sign Language Proficiency Interview](#) or the [Sign Language Proficiency Interview](#).

In fact, Teachers of the Deaf often detail that teacher preparation programs do not provide sufficient professional knowledge and skills to deal with the multitude of different types of Deaf students. Such teachers often express extreme dissatisfaction with no real training about the work of educational interpreters from their teacher preparation programs and ultimately do not fully understand the type of work or role of educational interpreters (Luckner & Ayantoye, 2013; Fitzmaurice, 2021a, 2021b).

In other words, Teachers of the Deaf do not understand the work of educational interpreters (Fitzmaurice, 2021a), their role (Fitzmaurice, 2021b), have no demonstration of their own bilingual abilities, much less the ability to interpret. Compounding that entails factors that assessing interpreting takes a significant amount of study.

However, we also need to cease hiring candidates, placing them in educational interpreting positions, and expecting them to ‘learn on the job.’ This process takes years of full-time study all while not providing meaningful access for Deaf students.

Why This is Important

In 2017, the United States Supreme Court ruling opinion in [Andrew F. vs. Douglas County School District](#) a FAPE, guaranteed by the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), means a school system *must* offer an

Individualized Educational Program (IEP) reasonably calculated to enable a child to make progress appropriate in light of the child's circumstances (p. 2). The standard of a FAPE is "more than *de minimis* progress" (p.3) and must be appropriately challenging.

If an educational interpreter is unable to convey meaning sufficiently enough for a Deaf student to learn (less than an EIPA 3.5) the Deaf student is receiving *less than de minimis* access. Thereby not receiving a FAPE.

More recently, the United States Supreme Court (2023) ruled on [Perez v. Sturgis Public Schools](#). Perez was a Deaf student in the public-school system and did not have a qualified educational interpreter yet was passed through grade by grade until ultimately he was unable to receive a high school diploma. Perez sought redress through IDEA with the Michigan Department of Education and concurrently sued the school district under the American's with Disabilities Act (1990). Under the IDEA due process, Perez was going to be provided additional schooling. The case addressed whether or not the IDEA due process was the only remedy for such a situation. The Supreme Court determined it was not. Perez' will receive the relief ordered in the IDEA due process *and is also able to proceed with compensatory damages lawsuit* from the Sturgis Public School System under the ADA.

To be clear, the school system is now being sued because they did not provide a qualified educational interpreter and misrepresented a student's educational progress.

What to Do?

If you have an educational interpreter working for your school district, ensure they have an appropriate EIPA credential (minimum EIPA 3.5), you should be asking for a copy of those scores as educational interpreters are renewing their annual employment contracts.

If you have an educational interpreter working in your school district who has not taken an EIPA test as yet, reach out immediately to the SCEIC to help schedule that. Or, if you have a candidate interviewing for an educational interpreter position with no EIPA score as yet, reach out to the [SCEIC](#) to help you in the screening process and subsequent EIPA testing on a provisional hire.

Summary

Ensuring Deaf students have meaningful access to a qualified educational interpreter (e.g. EIPA 3.5+) is the only way to ensure the student is receiving a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE). Particularly in light of the Supreme Court decision which found a Deaf student did not receive a qualified interpreter and was unable to receive a high school diploma was free sue a school district for compensatory damages for emotional distress and lost income resulting from the school district's failure to provide the Deaf student a qualified educational interpreter is an appropriate remedy.

Again, hiring an educational interpreter without actually knowing if they are able to do the work is akin to asking someone to perform surgery without knowing if they have been to medical school. You need to ensure Deaf students in South Carolina are not denied access on a daily basis by hiring someone without any credentials.

References

- Arpino, K. (2022). Starved for knowledge: The effect of language deprivation and mainstream education on deaf accessibility to the United States education system. *Honors Scholar Theses*. 861. https://opencommons.uconn.edu/srhonors_theses/861
- Cates, D. & Delkamiller, J. (2021). The impact of sign language interpreter skill on education outcomes in K-12 settings. In E. Winston & S. B. Fitzmaurice (Eds.), *Advances in Educational Interpreting*. Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press.
- Cerney, B. (2007). Language Acquisition. <http://www.handandmind.org/LgAcquisition.pdf>
- Cerney, J. (2007). *Deaf education in America: Voices of children from inclusion settings*. Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press.
- Cheng, Q., Roth, A., Halgren, E., & Mayberry, R. I. (2019). Effects of early language deprivation on brain connectivity: language pathways in deaf native and late first-language learners of American Sign Language. *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, 13, 1-12.
- Cokely, D. R. (1992). *Interpretation: A sociolinguistic model*. Burtonsville, Md.: Linstok Press.
- Commission on Education of the Deaf (1988). *Toward equality: Education of the deaf – A report to the President and the Congress of the United States*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Curtiss, S. (1977). *Genie: A psycholinguistic study of a modern-day "Wild Child."* New York, NY: Academic Press.
- Andrew F. v. Douglas County School District, Volume 580 U.S. ____ 2017.
- Fitzmaurice, S. (2020). Educational interpreters and the Dunning-Kruger effect. *Journal of Interpretation*, 28(2). RID Press at University of North Florida.
- Fitzmaurice, S. (2017). Unregulated autonomy: Uncredentialed educational interpreters in rural schools. *American Annals of the Deaf*, 162(3), 253-264.
- Frishberg, N. (1990). *Interpreting: An introduction*. (Rev.). Silver Spring, Md.: Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf.
- Friedmann, N., & Rusou, D. (2015). Critical period for first language: The crucial role of input during the first year of life. *Current Opinion in Neurobiology*, 35, 27-34.
- Gile, D. (1995). *Basic concepts and models for interpreter and translator training*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Co.
- Hall, M. L., Hall, W. C., & Caselli, N. K. (2019). Deaf children need language, not (just) speech. *First Language*, 39(4), 367-395.
- Hall, W. C. (2017). What you don't know can hurt you: The risk of language deprivation by impairing sign language development in deaf children. *Maternal and Child Health Journal*, 21(5), 961-965.

- Hurwitz, T. A. (1991). Report from national task force on educational interpreting. In *Conference proceedings: Educational interpreting: Into the 1990s*. Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University College of Continuing Education, 19–23.
- Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 § 108-446 U.S.C. Sec. 300.34(c)(4) (2004).
- Janzen, T. (2005). Introduction to the theory and practice of signed language interpreting. In Janzen, T (Ed.) *Topics in signed language interpreting*. (3–24).
- Johnson, L. (2004). *Highly qualified educational interpreters*. Retrieved from <http://www.unco.edu/doit/Resources/NASDSE%202004.pdf>
- Lane, H. (1976). *The Wild Boy of Aveyron*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Johnson, L., Taylor, M., Schick, B., Brown, S. & Bolster, L. (2018). Complexities in educational interpreting: An investigation into patterns of practice. Edmonton, AB: Interpreting Consolidated.
- Moser-Mercer, B. (1997). Process models in simultaneous interpretation. C. Hauenschild & S. Heizmann, *Machine translation and translation theory*, (3-18). The Hague, Netherlands: Mouton de Gruyter.
- McLeskey, J., Tyler, N., & Flippin, S.S. (2004). The supply and demand for special education teachers: A review of research regarding the chronic shortage of special education teachers. *Journal of Special Education*. 38 (1), 5-21.
- Musgrove, M. (2011). U.S. Department of Education interprets Part B’s Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) requirements as applied to children who are deaf. Office of Special Education Programs, U.S. Department of Education.
- National Association of Interpreters in Education. (2019). *Professional Guidelines for Interpreting in Educational Settings* (1st ed.). Retrieved from www.naiedu.org/guidelines.
- Perez, L. v. Sturgis Public Schools, 598 U. S. ____ (2023).
- Russell, D. (2005). Consecutive and simultaneous interpreting. In Janzen, T. (Ed.), *Topics in signed language interpreting: Theory and practice*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Co.
- Schick, B., & Williams, K. (1999). Skills levels of educational interpreters working in public schools. *Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education*, 144-155.
- Schick, B., & Williams, K. (2001). The educational interpreter performance assessment: Evaluating interpreters who work with children. *Odyssey*. Winter/Spring, 12.
- Schick, B., & Williams, K. (2004). The educational interpreter performance assessment: Current structure and practices. In E. A. Winston (Ed.), *Educational interpreting: How it can succeed* (186-205). Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press.
- Schick, B., Williams, K., & Kupermintz, H. (2005) Look who’s being left behind: educational interpreters and access to education for deaf and hard-of-hearing students. *Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education* 11:1 (3-20). Oxford University Press.
- Seleskovitch, D. (1978). *Interpreting for international conferences: Problems of language and communication*. Silver Spring, Md.: Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf Publications.