



# The **Role** of Deaf Interpreters

## Investigating What Deaf Interpreters Experienced

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**D**uring the 2008 Conference of Interpreter Trainers in San Juan, PR, the National Consortium of Interpreter Education Centers (NCIEC) held a session titled, “Discovery in the Emerging Field of Deaf Interpreting.” Deaf interpreters (DIs), professors and hearing interpreters (HIs) convened to discuss the major issues that DIs experience in educational settings, interpreting opportunities, interpreting tests, team interpreting and other situations. It has been noted that DIs struggle for their credentials through interpreter education programs, written and performance tests and interpreter agencies. They often encounter obstacles, such as having to provide audiograms to meet the prerequisites for enrolling in interpreter education programs. Some are rejected due to the degree of hearing loss they possess. Others are rejected from interpreter agencies because the agencies feel that they can do a better job without DIs. Additionally, there are often not enough DI workshops in their areas causing many DIs to incur inordinate expenses to travel to attend these necessary trainings. Furthermore, the demeanor of other interpreters accepting DIs as “interpreters” is an additional challenge.

“The Role of Deaf Interpreters: Investigating What Deaf Interpreters

Experienced” was a research paper that was written during my graduate program to earn a Masters of Arts in Interpreting. The purpose of this research was to explore the experiences of DIs in the workplace where they team with HIs. This article provides a summary of the research conducted.

Stewart, Schein and Cartwright’s (2004) book titled, *Sign Language Interpreting Exploring its Art and Science*, described a Certified Deaf Interpreter (CDI) as a relay interpreter which was then later developed as a special professional certification for DIs in order to interpret. In addition, the CDI also understands their professional role as a DI when HIs struggle to understand a deaf consumer’s communication style and/or needs. CDIs are often called to team interpret for a deaf consumer’s home signs or native sign languages, the emotionally disturbed or the deaf-blind.

The empirical research was to focus on five DIs and their working experiences as such. Currently, there is little research on DIs working in specific settings, including how effective DIs

and HIs communication demonstrates a breakthrough or set-back for each setting. DIs were interviewed about their experiences working with the HI, how they are perceived by their communities, how DIs are contacted and how each interpreter finds their incompetence for

such settings with the quality of their signing skills, their trainings, their knowledge of specific settings and their recommendation for future research and effort to enhance the quality of team interpreting services. DIs explained how they were being called for interpreting services for the first time after HIs had made several attempts in advising service providers to hire DIs for effective communication. After the DIs were hired and rendered the communication, the service providers found the benefits of having DIs to break through the communication barriers.

The DIs were interviewed via Sorenson videophone from Peet Hall at Gallaudet University, except that one was interviewed face-to-face. The DIs represented all regions of the country: East, South, Midwest and West. They all agreed to have their interview recorded and used for my research.

The DIs’ backgrounds included residential school, mainstreamed school with a lot of deaf role models, and a combination of schooling at the Native

American reservation, public school and residential school. Two of the DIs were Native Americans, one was African-American and two were Caucasian.

Their experiences as DIs, when they teamed with HIs, produced both effective and ineffective interactive communication outcomes in specific settings. Some DIs got into a dilemma since their state did not recognize DIs in the state licensure bill, and others experienced positive and negative aspects of DIs working with HIs with the ideas to transform the process. In Kushalnagar's and Rashid's (2008) research, they found that HIs have become accustomed to interpreting for deaf consumers as a client instead of being professional deaf individuals.

Of the 21 interview questions, five contained the most interesting answers. The following questions were asked:

**QUESTION:** How are you perceived as a DI in your community?

**ANSWERS:** DIs are respected and admired; provide positive working relationships and leadership; and serve as role models. One of the DIs was hired after a HI saw her interpreting a performance on stage and hired her because the HI needed her skill for a specific assignment. One scheduler who was not sure whether DIs should team with HIs would check with the DI for his/her opinion.

**QUESTION:** What do you like about working with a HI? What do you dislike?

**ANSWERS:** DIs often experience positive working relationships with HIs and build a team work approach. Some DIs experienced some types of setbacks if the HI found out that the DI was incompetent for certain settings such as legal or mental health or if the HIs themselves were incompetent to interpret for specific settings. However, DIs do experience negative working relationships if the HI is arrogant or demonstrates resentment toward a DI being present in the same room. DIs notice that some HIs reformulate the source message and leave very little message for the DI to interpret.

**QUESTION:** Do service providers notice the difference when there is a DI and HI team?

**ANSWERS:** DIs indicated that domineering interpreters will oppress them because they feel they do not need a DI. Additionally, DIs noted that they often travel a great distance to work and, at times, find they are teamed with a HI who has very low level interpreting skills.

**QUESTION:** How can you convince HIs to work with you, and how will they know when to use you?

**ANSWERS:** This was quickly answered by the interviewees with, "Seeing is believing," and, "You have to experience working with a team." An example provided follows: a deaf man was in jail for a traffic violation for three years and no accommodations were provided for him until a DI came to interpret teamed with a HI. After all the inquiries from the law enforcement officers were answered, he was released from jail instantly.

**QUESTION:** Do you feel you were overlooked because the perception is that you are not capable of interpreting? What were the circumstances in which you were overlooked? What was the purpose of this action?

**ANSWERS:** All DIs answered yes to these questions and their follow-up clarification differed case by case. One HI asked if the DI had legal training, and because he did not have the legal training, the interpreting assignment was postponed. Some DIs noticed that some HIs do not want DIs to be teamed with them because they either feel intimidated by their presence or are offended by the teaming assignment.

Other questions with impact to this topic include how do DIs get more work? HIs are a crucial avenue for DI work as there is a great need to have HIs advocate for and provide testimonials about their experience working with DIs. DIs suggested that interpreter agencies are the leading source to hire DIs. However, many do not.

In Kushalnagar's and Rashid's (2008) research on deaf professionals and designated interpreters, HIs attitudes toward deaf people were identified as stereotypes. These negative attitudes

The Deaf Caucus solicited this article for *VIEWS* to offer a greater perspective from deaf interpreters. We encourage all deaf interpreters to share your experiences by submitting articles for publication consideration to Tina Schultz, Director of Communications and Education at [views@rid.org](mailto:views@rid.org).

included recognizing deaf people as being pitiful and dependent and characterizing them as demonstrating aggression and suppression among the deaf subcultural groups such as African-American, Asian and gay communities. Reversely, the identified positive attitudes come from those interpreters who have had a lot of interaction among the Deaf community and had a deaf professor during their interpreting education program. Either the negative or positive attitudes may improve or worsen during their interpreting assignments, depending on each individual's drive for their profession.

In order to understand how a team of DIs and HIs work together in a group, it is similar to Boudreault's (2005) chapter when he described that a DI could have the expertise of facilitating the message from one language to another type of communication method comparing to the HI. DIs can perform a variety of skills by using voicing, gesturing, writing or other communication strategies. The DI already incorporated these skills long before the certification was implemented for DIs, which was known as Reverse Skills Certificate (RSC) and as bilingual. Often DIs became "helpers or advocates" for the deaf consumers however, they

were not aware of the Code of Ethics. The Code of Ethics has been revised to the NAD-RID Code of Professional Conduct, which was adopted by RID in July 2005.

Boudreault explained how a Canadian DI teamed with a HI in specific settings uses Langue des Signes Quebecoise (LSQ), which is a method used in French sign language. This method was performed in consecutive interpretation through four different people and reverse. For English to ASL, the message was reformulated from the English source message to the target message. The specific interactive interpretation produced an effective method to translate the message.

Ressler's (1999) research on "Intermediary Interpretation" on how to "feed" the source information to the DI is the only research addressing deaf and hearing interpreter teamwork. Her research focused on how to conduct multi-tasking by listening to the source message and reformulating the contact signs to allow the DI to reformulate the message into ASL. The HI continued to monitor the DI's target message and give the message. Once they become accustomed to their interactive message, the HI would begin to give the key word or points and allow the DI to contextualize the message.

Here is an important note about the history of the RSC and why the pool of CDIs is rather alarmingly small. In the mid-1970s, RID had a large pool of RSCs. Many deaf people took the test and passed. Many DIs maintained their certification and paid their membership for many years. However, many of the DIs who possessed certification canceled their membership because they were not receiving work assignments as DIs.

The CDI test data accumulated during the period of January 1, 2006 to August 20, 2008, provided pass and fail rates for both deaf and hard of hearing interpreters who

took the English written test and the ASL written test and performance test. Out of 152 applicants, only 43 DIs passed the written test and 26 out of 65 passed the performance test. According to the current RID-CDI directory, there are 80 CDIs residing in the United States.

In conclusion, there is so much more to share regarding this topic. One DI mentioned, "the awareness of DIs and their reputations are slowly being recognized like throwing a pebble into a lake and watching the ripple break throughout the lake. Watching the ripples slowly spread across the lake is similar to the reputation and recognition of the effective communication for service providers. For DIs' awareness, it is in the second ring of the ripples." Who are the ones who often called for DIs? Interpreters from deaf family or siblings who acquired ASL as a second language; individuals with great attitudes about DIs and the Deaf community are the ones who often called for DIs. There is a great need for more deaf-friendly workshops and interpreting education programs both nationally and internationally. DIs also needs to be aware of their own professional demeanors when working with HIs which can be like a magnet; two positive attitudes will connect and negative attitudes will reject. There is a great need to develop promotional materials for service providers about using DIs. One DI mentioned delicately that he/she felt he/she walks on a very thin ice and moves in extreme caution in his/her profession so as not to have intense interactions with HIs, since HIs are one of the avenues DIs have to gain respect and recognition in the field. As Lazoriak (2005) provided in a workshop at the National Association of the Deaf Conference titled, "Deaf Interpreters: How to Design Your Personalized Educational Blue Print to Increase your Skills and Experience

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