

## Novice Interpreters, American Sign Language Proficiency, and the National Interpreter Certification Performance Exam

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### Cover Page Footnote

Footnote 1 (In the body of the manuscript) We wish to highlight that we do not necessarily advocate one way or the other for using the ASLPI. Footnote 2 (In the body of the manuscript) Data were originally gathered as part of a program grant (#H160C160001) from the Department of Education. However, the contents of this paper do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government. (Authority: 20 U.S.C. 1221e-3 and 3474).

## **Novice Interpreters, American Sign Language Proficiency, and the National Interpreter Certification Performance Exam**

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### **ABSTRACT**

More than 40 years after American Sign Language (ASL) and interpreter education were first offered as programs of study in higher education, little is known about the level of ASL proficiency of graduates from baccalaureate degree programs in interpreting and what level of ASL proficiency may be associated with passing the performance portion of the National Interpreter Certification (NIC) examination. With this in mind, we posed three questions: 1) What is the distribution of ASL Proficiency Interview (ASLPI) ratings of a national sample of novice interpreters relatively near the time of graduation from baccalaureate degree programs in interpreting? 2) What is the distribution of ASLPI ratings of a national sample of novice interpreters relatively near the time of taking the NIC Performance Exam? 3) What is the relationship between ASLPI ratings and passing/not passing the NIC Performance Exam? Results showed that relatively closer to IEP graduation ( $N = 134$ ), about 56% of ASLPI proficiency levels were at or below Level 2+, and 44% were at or above Level 3. For ASLPI proficiency levels obtained relatively closer to taking the NIC Performance Exam ( $N = 154$ ), about 30% were at or below Level 2+, and 70% of ratings were at or above Level 3. Results showed that all those who passed the NIC Performance Exam and who had a rating for the ASLPI taken relatively closer to taking the NIC Performance Exam ( $N = 27$ ) obtained an ASLPI proficiency level of 3 or higher. However, it is essential to note that approximately 75% of participants who obtained a proficiency level of 3 or higher did not pass the NIC Performance Exam the first time they took it. Additionally, the higher the ASLPI level, the higher the proportion of people passing the NIC Performance Exam. This study has implications for further research regarding ASL proficiency for students entering and exiting IEPs and preparing for national credentialing.

## INTRODUCTION

Proficiency in at least two languages is considered a necessary element for competent interpreting, independent of language modality (e.g., signed or spoken) and setting (Cokely, 1987; Jiménez Ivars, Pinazo Catalayud, & Ruiz i Forés, 2014; Shaw, Grbic, & Franklin, 2004). Although educators of American Sign Language (ASL)-English interpreters have long highlighted the need for students to be proficient in both ASL and English (Cokely, 1987; Peterson, forthcoming; Winston, 2005), students' and novice interpreters' lack of adequate language proficiency, particularly in ASL, is also widely seen as one of the reasons that some new graduates do not display the level of interpreting skill needed for employment and, related to this, may not exhibit the minimal skill level needed to earn the National Interpreter Certification (NIC). In this article, we report on a study that examined:

- 1) the ASL Proficiency Interview (ASLPI) ratings of a national sample of novice interpreters near the time of their graduation from baccalaureate degree programs in interpreting;
- 2) the ASLPI ratings of a national sample of novice interpreters near the time they took the NIC Performance Test; and
- 3) the relationship between ASLPI ratings and passing/not passing the NIC Performance Exam.

We believe that the study results have important implications for further research regarding ASL proficiency for students entering and exiting Interpreter Education Programs (IEPs) and preparing for national credentialing.

### ASL PROFICIENCY AND INTERPRETER EDUCATION PROGRAMS

As noted in the introduction, high-level proficiency in at least two languages is generally considered a *sine qua non* for interpreters (see, for example, Peterson, forthcoming, who discusses language proficiency recommendations for interpreters between spoken languages and between ASL and English). In the United States, the majority of ASL-English interpreters self-identify as native users of English, with ASL as their second or third language, usually learned as adults in secondary and/or post-secondary settings (Beal, 2020; Nicodemus & Emmorey, 2013). Acquiring a new language as an adult can be both challenging and time-consuming (Beal, 2020; Jacobs, 1996). ASL has been identified as a particularly difficult language for native users of English to acquire (Jacobs, 1996); indeed, Quinto-Pozos (2005) suggests that a non-native adult ASL learner will likely require between six and fifteen years to develop proficiency. The fact that the majority of prospective interpreters are non-native users of ASL and, in many cases, are likely actively working to acquire the language is highly salient to interpreter educators since it implies that educators need to be concerned not only with interpreting skills but also with issues of language acquisition and proficiency.

These issues have been important for interpreter educators and stakeholders for many decades. For example, deaf respondents to Anderson & Stauffer's (1991) survey identified ASL proficiency as the most important characteristic of an ideal interpreter. Shaw, Grbic, & Franklin

(2004) report that both students and educators see language (in)competency as a major limiting factor in developing interpreting skills. Despite wide agreement about the importance of language proficiency for interpreting skill development and performance, numerous scholars have pointed out over the years that many students entering IEPs do not have sufficient proficiency in ASL (Anderson & Stauffer, 1991; Ball, 2013; Cokely, 1987; Garrett & Girardin, 2018; Godfrey, 2010; Monikowski, 1995; Quinto-Pozos, 2005; Roy, 2000; Winston, Lee, Monikowski, Peterson, & Swabey, under review; Witter-Merithew & Johnson, 2005).

In 1994, members of the Conference of Interpreter Trainers debated and approved a set of standards for IEPs, which had been 15 years in the making (Cogen, 1995). These standards subsequently formed the foundation for the current standards espoused by the Commission on Collegiate Interpreter Education (CCIE), the accrediting body for IEPs in the United States and Canada. These CCIE standards, which date to 2006 and were most recently revised in 2019, address language proficiency at the time of entry into the program and language development during the course of study, as illustrated in these two examples from the standards. “Standard 5.3: The program ensures that students have a strong foundation in English and ASL prior to enrollment in interpreting skills classes” (CCIE, 2019). “Standard 7.1: The curriculum fosters the continued development of language competency in both ASL and English that meets program requirements” (CCIE, 2019).

The existence of these accreditation standards has not, however, alleviated concerns about students’ and novice interpreters’ language proficiency levels as they enter and graduate from IEPs. Moreover, at the time of writing, only twenty of the approximately 150 programs in the United States are accredited by CCIE.

The relative merits of various types of IEPs (certificate, A.A., B.A., MA) in terms of appropriate preparation of work-ready interpreters are still debated. Some argue that 2-year AA programs are insufficient (Garrett & Girardin, 2018; Gómez, Bajo Molina, Padilla Benitez, & Santiago de Torres, 2007). At the same time, there are concerns that the shift away from community colleges creates affordability barriers and limits access to the field (Holcomb, 2018). However, many programs, irrespective of their length or the type of degree they offer, begin teaching interpreting skills while students are still in the process of acquiring foundational ASL skills.

In addition to the issue of teaching interpreting skills to students whose language proficiency may not be sufficient for the task, the field of ASL-English interpreter education in the United States has identified an issue in the literature since at least 1994, known variously as the “readiness to credential gap,” the “readiness to work gap,” and the “graduation to work gap” (Carter, 2015; Godfrey, 2010; Maroney & Smith 2010; Patrie, 1995). These phrases refer to the observation that many recent graduates of IEPs are not yet ready to enter the interpreting workforce nor to attain credentials such as national certification. Godfrey (2010) reports that, on average, the time needed to obtain national credentialing is 19-24 months after graduation from an IEP.

In response to this long-standing concern, an intensive and collaborative national process was carried out, through which five domains of entry-to-practice competencies were identified and explicated (Witter-Merithew & Johnson, 2005). The third domain focuses on language skills competencies and includes the following, further emphasizing the importance of language

proficiency for interpreter education. “3.1 Demonstrate superior proficiency and flexibility in one’s native language (L1) by effectively communicating in a wide range of situations with speakers of various ages and backgrounds” (Distance Opportunities for Interpreter Training Center, n.d., p. 6). “3.2 Demonstrate near-native like communicative competence and flexibility in one’s second language (L2) by effectively communicating in a variety of routine personal and professional situations with native and non-native speakers of varying ages, race, gender, education, socio-economic status, and ethnicity” (Distance Opportunities for Interpreter Training Center, n.d., p. 6).

Roy (2021) recently brought the connected issues of language proficiency and interpreter education into sharp focus in a presentation at an international conference on interpreting. She argued that it is incorrect to label the 150 programs currently in existence in the United States as “interpreter training” or “interpreter education” programs, going on to say:

We have 150 programs in the U.S. that are called interpreter training programs, but they are not. Students with no language skills in American Sign Language are accepted into these programs. They then are learning sign language, learning about the people who use this language, and learning to interpret all at the same time. And as you all can guess, it is not working, nor is it producing quality interpreters (p. 1).

In addition to viewing ASL proficiency as an important factor in readiness for interpreter education and entrance into the workforce, we posit that ASL proficiency may be related to readiness for national credentialing. While such a suggestion seems intuitive and reasonable, there is little empirical data available connecting ASL proficiency levels with the results of credentialing exams for interpreters. The credentialing exam used in this study is the National Interpreter Certification (NIC), which is administered by the Center for the Assessment of Sign Language Interpreting (CASLI), which serves as the testing entity for the purpose of RID (Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf) certification.

The CASLI website states that the purpose of the exam is to “determine whether a candidate is able to demonstrate that they meet or exceed the minimum level of knowledge, skills and abilities an ASL interpreter needs to competently perform on the job in a conventional setting” (CASLI, n.d.). It also lists several skills required for competent interpreting, including the ability to comprehend and re-construct individuals’ communicative acts “between fluent American Sign Language and English” (CASLI, n.d.). The RID Job/Task Analysis for National Interpreter Certification states that “newly certified sign language interpreters have advanced competence in ASL and English and are able to accurately facilitate communication between both languages – consecutively or simultaneously – as is appropriate for the situation” (2016, p. 13). As the preceding quotations illustrate, passing the NIC exam indicates achievement of a minimum baseline level of competency in interpreting and is understood to imply advanced-level competency in both ASL and English.

During the period of this study, the NIC exam consisted of two components: a written knowledge exam and an interpreting performance exam, with candidates required to pass the former before taking the latter. Anecdotal evidence suggests that IEPs generally prepare students well for the knowledge exam, and statistics shared by RID confirm this. Data from RID’s annual reports indicate that in 2018 and 2019, the pass rates of first-time test takers for the knowledge

exam were 90% and 82%, respectively (RID Annual Report, 2019; 2020). Pass rates for the performance component of the exam are much lower, however. Even though the exam is described as setting a minimum standard for competency, RID's annual reports indicate pass rates of 26% for the performance exam for first-time candidates in 2018 and 35% in 2019 (RID Annual Report, 2019; 2020). Although it seems reasonable to suppose that some of those who take this exam once or twice would not reach a minimum standard of competence, these numbers suggest that a large proportion of test takers are not performing at this minimal level or are at least not able to do so during the certification exam.

In concluding this section, we note that the excerpts quoted above from the CCIE standards, the entry-to-practice competencies, CASLI, and the RID Job/Task Analysis make use of some of the following terms and phrases concerning (prospective) interpreters' ASL proficiency: strong foundation, near-native like communicative competence, advanced levels, fluent, and advanced competence. We note that these terms and phrases lack specific criteria that would operationalize them. In addition, given concerns and data described in the preceding paragraphs vis a vis post-IEP outcomes and low pass rates on the NIC performance exam, we suggest that the use of terms and phrases such as these concerning new graduates and novice interpreters appears to be to a large extent aspirational, rather than descriptive. At the same time, the extent to which ASL proficiency levels contribute to low pass rates on the performance portion of the NIC is poorly understood, as there is very little empirical evidence regarding specific levels of ASL proficiency of recent IEP graduates and of novice interpreters who take the NIC Performance exam. With this in mind, we posed three questions:

- 1) What is the distribution of ASLPI ratings of a sample of BA IEP graduates (from CCIE accredited and non-accredited programs in different parts of the country)?
- 2) What is the distribution of ASLPI ratings of a sample of novice interpreters relatively nearer the time of taking the NIC Performance Exam?
- 3) What is the relationship between ASLPI ratings and passing/not passing the NIC Performance Exam?

## **METHOD**

### **PARTICIPANTS**

Data from 189 novice American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters were included in this study. Data were initially collected between 2018-2021. The IEPs from which they graduated include both CCIE-accredited and non-CCIE-accredited programs and were located throughout the various regions of the United States. The following are data based on the number of people who responded to each demographic item.

**Table 1.** *Background and Demographic Variables (N = 189)*

<b>Background and Demographic Variables</b>	<b>%</b>
Female	81.4%
Male	13.3%
Non-binary/third gender	4.8%
Hispanic or Latina/o/x	15.4%
American Indian or Alaska Native*	1.6%
Asian	3.7%
Black or African American	7.9%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	< 1.6%
White	84.1%
Additional not listed	5.3%
Hearing	100%
ASL heritage language user	5.3%
20-23 years old	53.2%
24-30 years old	34.0%
31-40 years old	9.1%
41 and older	3.7%

*Note.* \*Some participants were asked to select one of the race categories while others were asked to select one or more categories; thus, the sum of percentages may exceed 100%.

## **MATERIALS**

Three measures were used in this study. The first measure was an online survey that included items about participants' backgrounds and demographic characteristics.

The second measure was the American Sign Language Proficiency Interview (ASLPI).<sup>1</sup> The ASLPI is used for a variety of purposes related to employment and education, including as a pre-admission assessment of proficiency in some IEPs (Carter, 2015; Holmes, 2020). The ASLPI is a 20-25 minute interview between an interviewee and examiner, which is recorded and then rated for ASL proficiency. The ASLPI has a range of proficiency levels from 0-5 with a + between numbers (e.g., 1, 1+, 2). The “+” is not a midpoint between ratings, but rather it represents that the participant demonstrates proficiency somewhere between the two levels. Higher ratings indicate higher levels of ASL proficiency. Based on the ASLPI website, “the majority of results fall within the 2-3 proficiency level range. This national distribution includes examinees who are deaf, hard of hearing, late-deafened and hearing who range in background, experience, education, age and acquisition of ASL” (ASLPI, n.d.).

The descriptions for Levels 2 and 3 are below. Descriptions of all the proficiency levels and additional information about the ASLPI are described in more detail in the appendices of this paper and on the Gallaudet ASLPI website (<https://www.gallaudet.edu/the-american-sign-language-proficiency-interview/aslpi/>).

Level 2: Signers at this proficiency level are able to express uncomplicated communicative tasks in straightforward practical and social situations. They demonstrate the ability to elaborate on concrete and familiar topics (e.g., current events, work, family, autobiographical) with some confidence. They can also discuss with hesitancy some unfamiliar topics, relying on learned phrases, recombinations, and circumlocution. Sentences are discrete and are influenced by language patterns other than those of the target language with noticeable errors, ranging from occasional to considerable, affecting the clarity. They may display self-repair ability. They are able to respond to simple, direct questions or requests for basic information. Their responses are short and may leave sentences incomplete. If asked to handle a variety of topics, accuracy cannot be maintained. Comprehension is good with familiar topics, but frequent repetition and/or rephrasing are needed with unfamiliar topics (ASLPI, n.d.).

Level 3: Signers at this proficiency level are able to express language with sufficient structural accuracy and vocabulary to participate in most familiar and unfamiliar topics about practical, social, and professional situations. They can discuss particular interests with reasonable ease. They demonstrate confidence in discussing topics at the paragraph discourse level but exhibit errors and breakdown when in-depth elaboration and detail is requested. Occasional groping for vocabulary can be present. There is reasonable control of grammar but there are some noticeable imperfections and errors which may interfere with understanding. They tend to function reactively by responding to direct questions or requests for information. They are capable of asking a variety of questions when needed to gather information pertaining to certain situations. They may combine and recombine known language elements to create short paragraph length responses. Their language contains pauses and self-corrections as they search for adequate vocabulary and language

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<sup>1</sup> We wish to highlight that we do not necessarily advocate one way or the other for using the ASLPI.

forms. Comprehension is often accurate with highly familiar and predictable topics although misunderstandings may occur (ASLPI, n.d.).

The third measure was the NIC Interview and Performance Exam. “The NIC Interview and Performance Exam tests the ability to apply the RID Code of Professional Conduct to ethical dilemmas in interpreting situations and real-world interpreting skills appropriate to an interpreter holding national certification” (CASLI, n.d.). During the one-hour exam, examinees are presented with seven vignettes to which they respond. Two vignettes are based on ethical issues, and examinees must respond to these in ASL. Five vignettes are interpreting scenarios in which the candidate must interpret between ASL and English. Scores include a “pass” or “fail” (CASLI, n.d.).

## PROCEDURE

Data were initially collected as part of a 5-year grant awarded to the CATIE Center at St. Catherine University by the U.S. Department of Education, Rehabilitation Services Administration<sup>2</sup>. The grant program was designed to increase the knowledge and skills of novice ASL-English interpreters.

Participants in the program were asked for their consent for their data to be used for research purposes as well, and data from those who gave consent are included in this study. Background data were collected through online surveys, and novice interpreters completed the ASLPI and NIC Performance test. Some novice interpreters completed the ASLPI once, and others completed the ASLPI twice (typically at the beginning and the end of the program). Participants took the NIC Performance Test once at the end of their time in the program. Descriptive statistics were calculated on the data.

## RESULTS

Possible proficiency levels for the ASLPI had a range of Level 0 to Level 5 (see Appendix A for ASLPI descriptors and Appendix B for a comparison summary of these levels). There were some variations across participants in the amount of time between graduation, taking the ASLPI, and taking the NIC Performance Exam. Given the variations, the phrase “relatively closer to IEP graduation” describes ASLPI proficiency ratings gathered nearer to IEP graduation, and “relatively closer to taking the NIC Performance exam” describes ASLPI proficiency ratings gathered nearer the time of taking the NIC Performance Exam.

Table 2 shows the number and percentage of participants who obtained each proficiency level on the ASLPI relatively closer to IEP graduation ( $N = 134$ ). About 56% of ratings were at or below 2+, and 44% were at or above a 3.

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<sup>2</sup> Data were originally gathered as part of a program grant (#H160C160001) from the Department of Education. However, the contents of this paper do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government. (Authority: 20 U.S.C. 1221e-3 and 3474).

Table 3 shows the ASLPI proficiency levels obtained relatively closer to taking the NIC Performance Exam ( $N = 154$ ). About 30% of ratings on the ASLPI were at or below 2+, and 70% of ratings were at or above a 3.

**Table 2.** *Proficiency Levels on the ASLPI Obtained Relatively Closer to IEP Graduation ( $N = 134$  ratings)*

ASLPI Proficiency Levels	Number of Participants ( $n$ )	Percentage (%)
0		
0+		
1		
1+	8	5.97%
2	13	9.70%
2+	54	40.30%
3	39	29.10%
3+	16	11.94%
4	4	2.99%
4+		
5		
Total	134	100%

**Table 3.** Proficiency Levels on the ASLPI Obtained Relatively Closer to taking the NIC Performance Exam ( $N = 154$  ratings)

ASLPI Proficiency Levels	Number of Participants ( $n$ )	Percentage (%)
0		
0+		
1		
1+ or 2*	10	6.49%
2+	36	23.38%
3	66	42.86%
3+	35	22.73%
4	7	4.55%
4+		
5		
Total	154	100%

*Note.* \*Results for ASLPI proficiency levels 1+ and 2 are combined in the table due to small N values.

ASLPI proficiency levels obtained closer to taking the NIC Performance Exam were compared with NIC Performance Exam pass rates. Results showed that all those who passed the NIC Performance Exam and who had a rating for the ASLPI taken relatively closer to taking the NIC Performance Exam ( $N = 27$ ) obtained an ASLPI proficiency level of 3 or higher. However, it is essential to note that not all novice interpreters who obtained a proficiency level of 3 or higher on the ASLPI when taken closer to the NIC Performance Exam passed the NIC Performance Exam.

While approximately 14% of those who obtained a three on the ASLPI passed the NIC Performance Exam on their first attempt in the program, approximately 86% did not. Additionally, the higher the ASLPI proficiency level, the higher the proportion of people who passed the NIC Performance Exam (see Table 4).

**Table 4.** Proficiency Levels on the ASLPI Obtained Relatively Closer to Taking the NIC Performance Exam and NIC Pass Rates (N = 147)

ASLPI Proficiency Levels	Passed the NIC (Row %)	Did not Pass the NIC (Row %)
0		
0+		
1		
1+ or 2*	0.00%	100.00%
2+	0.00%	100.00%
3	13.85%	86.15%
3+	40.00%	60.00%
4	66.67%	33.33%
4+		
5		

*Note.* \*Results for ASLPI proficiency levels of 1+ and 2 are combined in the table due to small N values. Results in this table reflect the number of people for whom both an ASLPI proficiency level and NIC Performance Exam result were available. Percentages are row percentages within the proficiency level of the ASLPI.

## DISCUSSION

### DISTRIBUTION OF ASLPI RATINGS OF A SAMPLE OF NOVICE INTERPRETERS RELATIVELY CLOSER TO IEP GRADUATION

In looking at the distribution of the ASLPI proficiency levels in Table 2, about 56% of the ratings are in the Level 1+ to 2+ range, while the other 44% are Level 3 or higher. Another way of approaching these data is to look at the results from Level 2+ up: 40% of the proficiency ratings obtained relatively closer to graduation are at Level 2+, 29% at Level 3, and almost 12% at Level 3+, and 3% at Level 4. A last view on these ratings is to group them as follows: 16% of ratings are at Level 1+ to 2, 69% of ratings are at Level 2+ to 3, and 15% are at Level 3+ to 4. In this final

view, we see that approximately 70% of the ratings achieved at a time relatively nearer to IEP graduation are at a 2+ or a 3.

Whichever view one takes, these results suggest that many new graduates of IEPs may not have sufficient ASL proficiency to enter the workplace or earn national credentials. While there is no established consensus around minimum language proficiency ratings for interpreting proficiency, the ASLPI descriptor for Level 2 describes signers at this level as able to handle “uncomplicated communicative tasks” and notes that they may have difficulty with (linguistic) accuracy when “asked to handle a variety of topics.” Level 3 signers are described as having “good control of grammar but there are some noticeable imperfections and errors which may interfere with understanding;” their comprehension is described as “often accurate with highly familiar and predictable topics although misunderstandings may occur.” Descriptions of language competency that appear in the information about the NIC exam, which, as discussed above, is considered a minimum standard for general practitioners, could be understood as describing ASLPI ratings as high as 3+ or 4.

Thus, although ASL proficiency rated at Level 2 or 2+ indicates conversational skills in ASL, this level of language proficiency is likely not adequate for interpreting. Interpreting is a highly complex task requiring an enormous amount of cognitive effort (Gile, 1999, 2017). In addition, interpreters often find themselves in settings characterized by complex and unfamiliar topics, particularly in healthcare, legal, technical, and academic settings. The CASLI exam content outline and preparation guide (CASLI, n.d.) notes that certified interpreters are expected to be “able to accurately facilitate communication between both languages – consecutively or simultaneously – as is appropriate for the situation”—which requires a great deal of proficiency, range, and flexibility of language, as well as highly-developed interpreting skills. The potential for cognitive overload—and resulting declines in performance—is an issue of great concern and relevance for interpreters. While many aspects of the situation contribute to the cognitive load interpreters experience as they interpret, language proficiency is an important factor (Gile, 1999, 2009). The more cognitive effort required for comprehension or expression (for example, activating vocabulary or grammatical structures), the fewer cognitive resources are left for other parts of the interpreting process (Swabey, Nicodemus, Taylor & Gile, 2016). Indeed, research indicates that novice ASL-English interpreters may struggle more with comprehension (and thus interpret less effectively) when interpreting for ASL users with higher ASLPI proficiency ratings (Gamache, 2018).

The distribution of the ASL proficiency levels gathered near the time of IEP graduation (as reported in Table 2) thus raises important questions about the level of ASL proficiency that should be required before students begin taking interpreting skills courses. The descriptors for Level 1+ and Level 2 seem insufficient for interpreting skills development; similarly, while a Level 2+ proficiency level would be closely associated with a Level 3 rating, there is still a lack of at least one or two language skill indicators as described. Thus, the descriptors for Level 3 could be the minimal level of proficiency that seems appropriate for individuals beginning interpreting skills courses, with Level 4 proficiency being desirable for work-ready interpreters able to competently perform in settings that are not familiar or low risk. However, in these data of participants relatively closer to IEP graduation, we see that the largest cluster of ratings is at Levels 2+ and 3.

### **DISTRIBUTION OF ASLPI RATINGS OF A SAMPLE OF NOVICE INTERPRETERS RELATIVELY CLOSER TO TAKING THE NIC PERFORMANCE EXAM**

Turning our attention to the ASLPI proficiency levels obtained relatively closer to the time of taking the NIC Performance Exam, we see some differences in the distribution of ratings. However, it is important to note that the results in Table 2 and Table 3 represent overlapping but not identical sets of participants—any comparison between them should be undertaken with caution. About 30% of the ratings at this point are in the Level 1+ to 2+ range, which would seem to be below what would be required in order to pass the NIC Performance Exam, while 43% are at Level 3.

These two sets of ASLPI results are suggestive in connection with the school-to-work gap discussed earlier. It may be that the root of this problem is a lack of language proficiency, specifically in ASL. It may be that we are doing a disservice to students by teaching—or trying to teach—interpreting skills to students who do not yet have sufficiently strong foundational language skills. This disservice has several facets: we are asking them to do interpreting skill tasks that they do not have the foundational skills to succeed in doing, we are pushing students to develop coping tactics instead of solid interpreting skills and strategies, and we are overlaying interpreting on a weak foundation. Just as it is difficult and time-consuming to fix buildings that are constructed on weak foundations, it is difficult to improve and develop interpreting skills that have been taught to learners who lack a firm base of language proficiency in both ASL and English. Although buildings constructed on weak foundations can be propped up and, in some cases, fixed, it is usually more economical and effective to begin with a strong foundation.

### **RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ASLPI RATINGS AND PASSING/NOT PASSING THE NIC PERFORMANCE EXAM**

All those who passed the NIC Performance Exam the first time they took it and who had a rating for the ASLPI taken relatively closer to taking the NIC Performance Exam obtained an ASLPI proficiency level of 3 or higher. However, it is also important to note that as the ASLPI proficiency level increased from 3 to 3+ to 4, so did the NIC passing rates. The NIC pass rate for those with a Level 3 language proficiency rating is 14%, compared with 40% for those with an ASL proficiency Level 3+ and 67% with an ASL proficiency rating at Level 4. In other words, there seems to be an association between a higher ASLPI rating and a higher rate of passing. At the same time, not all participants with higher language proficiency ratings passed the NIC Performance Exam—there are likely other factors, in addition to language proficiency, affecting novices' ability to pass the NIC Performance Exam.

### **LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

It is important to note that the COVID-19 pandemic began during the next-to-last year of the grant project. It is impossible to be certain of all the effects the pandemic may have had. The initial design planned for all interpreters to take the ASLPI twice, once at graduation and once, several months later, near the time of taking the NIC Performance Exam. However, due to pandemic restrictions and changes to ASLPI testing procedures due to the pandemic, not all participants were able to take the ASLPI twice, and the timing of some exams also had to be adjusted. ASLPI testing centers had to shift to at-home (distanced) testing, and many CASLI NIC testing centers closed

down. The selection method for participants also varied in some ways, particularly during the pandemic years. There may have been additional impacts we have not been able to identify.

Finally, while the results of this study suggest a possible relationship between ASL language proficiency and obtaining the NIC, we could not draw conclusions about causation.

### **IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

The findings described above have implications for interpreter education, particularly with regard to ASL proficiency at the initiation of interpreting skills instruction, at IEP graduation, and at entry into the interpreting workforce. As well, these results likely are relevant to a variety of stakeholders, including prospective interpreting students, interpreter educators, administrators, members of deaf communities, employers, and policymakers. We believe that this is the first study of ASLPI proficiency levels of a national sample of novice interpreters relatively near the time they took the NIC Performance Exam, along with the relationship of these ratings to passing/not passing the NIC Performance Exam.

In reviewing the literature of the last 40 years of ASL and interpreting education, we observed that the field has recognized challenges related to the ASL proficiency of interpreting students and novices for almost as long as we have had formal degree programs in interpreting. Changes such as the lengthening of IEP programs and the institution of accreditation standards have been implemented, although not with the impact that might have been desired and expected. Research on ASL and interpreting, as well as ASL education and interpreting education, has grown. In the United States, there now exists one Ph.D. program in interpreting, a handful of M.A. programs that focus on ASL pedagogy, and a few other M.A. programs that focus on interpreting pedagogy. It is finally becoming more commonplace for IEPs to have deaf faculty who are interpreters and who teach interpreting. In some cases, ASL faculty and interpreting faculty are working more closely together rather than in silos. Many states now have licensure, and more IEPs are working to prepare graduates to meet state requirements, even if they are not yet ready for national credentialing.

Although the field of interpreter education has been discussing and working toward ‘closing’ the graduation to work gap, we suggest that perhaps the field has been focused on the wrong gap. The data reported here suggest that the ‘gap’ is not something that can be addressed solely by providing additional support to novice interpreters as they move from school to work. Rather, it seems that there are deeper, more foundational issues that need to be addressed.

Given the pressure in many colleges and universities to have B.A. students graduate in four years, programs may be inclined to begin teaching interpreting skills before students have acquired the language proficiency necessary to support the effective development of interpreting skills. They may also be inclined to rush the development of interpreting skills, teaching knowledge and skills very quickly, without time for students to adequately process, retain, and integrate what they are learning. The issue is not necessarily one of the novices needing more practice and polish after graduation, but rather that they need more time and practice to develop adequate language proficiency, followed by (rather than accompanied by) time and practice focused on the development of foundational interpreting skills.

At the same time, tuition is increasing for students, and there is increasing pressure to prepare graduates to be employable at graduation in their field of study. Faculty are often under pressure to fill classes and not to run classes with fewer than a certain number of students. There are important factors to consider in connection with the inclusivity and accessibility of IEPs. Despite the identification of issues of equity and inclusion, most IEP faculty and administrators are white and hearing. Admissions offices, perhaps eager for increased numbers, may portray interpreting as a major that leads to employment in a similar way that nursing, social work, and education do. However, lifelong commitment to language learning and community interaction, as well as the additional time outside of classroom requirements, may be underplayed in such recruitment efforts.

Perhaps instead of focusing on a post-graduation ‘gap,’ we should focus on gaps between ASL education (that is, focused on language acquisition) and interpreting education and within IEPs. ASL departments and Interpreting departments could increase their understanding of each other’s goals and practices and work more collaboratively, continuing to explore innovative and effective teaching methodologies (e.g., Cripps, Rosen, Cooper, Fenicle, & Sever-Hall, 2021). Conversations around the possibility of credentialing for IEP faculty could move forward. Programs could also explore how to increase collaboration between deaf and hearing teachers within IEPs, in line with the deaf/hearing team-teaching approach envisioned as early as the 1960s (Babbini, 1965; Ball, 2013). Discussions around the implementation of language proficiency levels and entry/exit requirements should also consider how such requirements could be implemented equitably.

It does not seem to be an effective practice to teach interpreting skills to students before they have attained a sufficient command of the languages that they interpret, yet this widespread practice continues. While recognizing that language proficiency levels vary widely even for native users of a language (Hulstijn, 2015) and that some asymmetry of language proficiency is expected for any interpreter working between an L1 and an L2 (see, for example, Tiselius & Englund Dimitrova, 2019), it is also true that the nature of the interpreting task requires a high level of proficiency in both languages (Peterson, forthcoming), including the L2, and ongoing efforts to continue development of range and capacity in both languages (cf. Gile, 1999, 2009). In our view, there is a need to operationalize definitions of ASL proficiency, perhaps along the lines of the descriptors of sign language proficiency developed for the European context (Leeson, van den Bogaerde, Rathmann & Haug, 2016). Such operationalized definitions would ideally address characteristics of language proficiency appropriate for three distinct points in interpreter skills education—entry to the interpreting program, program mid-point, and program graduation.

In this paper, we have argued that language proficiency is an important factor in interpreter education and in the development of competency in interpreting. At the same time, we recognize that prospective and novice interpreters have diverse backgrounds and lived experiences and that many complex factors influence the ability of individuals to acquire the knowledge, skills, and abilities to become qualified and competent interpreters. For example, as noted above, not all participants with an ASLPI rating of 3 or above passed the NIC Performance Exam. Further examination of the many factors influencing candidates’ performance on credentialing exams is needed. Given that higher education changes slowly and that educators have been aware of the need for changes for many years, what is a productive course of action? Do we need to dismantle current A.A. and BA IEPs and find a new model? Do we need to work quickly to develop a new

curriculum and entry and exit standards that will allow current programs to stay in place but graduate novice interpreters that are truly ready to enter the profession? What will it take for the field to acknowledge what is holding us back from making many much-needed changes? Is it a vested self-interest of educational institutions and individual programs in maintaining their current programs and positions that may lead to accepting and graduating students from IEPs, even when they are not quite ready? Is it possible to finally change the current system, or do we need to reboot?

There are complex institutional systems that perpetuate ineffective practices of teaching interpreting to students with insufficient proficiency in ASL, and changing (or dismantling) these systems will not be easy. However, this study suggests that ASL proficiency may be an important factor in the persistence of the readiness-to-work/readiness for certification gap and highlights the need to take action to address problematic practices related to teaching interpreting skills to learners whose language proficiency may not yet be adequate to the interpreting task.

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## APPENDIX A

### ASLPI PROFICIENCY LEVELS

Descriptions are from: <https://www.gallaudet.edu/the-american-sign-language-proficiency-interview/aslpi/>

Except for LEVEL 5, the ASLPI proficiency level received may include the assignment of a plus value (+). This does not represent a midway point between two levels, but may be inferred to indicate that the examinee exceeds the requirements for a particular level but does not satisfy in all respects the requirements of the next higher level.

#### LEVEL 5

Signers at this proficiency level are able to communicate with accuracy and fluency in order to participate fully and effectively in conversations on a wide variety of topics, both formal and informal and from concrete and abstract perspectives. They discuss their interests and special fields of competence, explain complex matters, and provide lengthy and coherent narrations, all with ease and impromptu detail. They present their opinions on issues and provide structured arguments to support those opinions. They are able to construct and develop hypotheses to explore alternative possibilities. They demonstrate no pattern of error in the use of basic structures, although they may make sporadic errors, particularly in low-frequency structures and in complex high-frequency structures. Such errors, if they do occur, do not distract or interfere with communication. They are able to use the language consistently with accuracy, complexity, flexibility and intuition and incorporate depth and breadth of vocabulary, and pertinent culture references. Comprehension is excellent across a broad spectrum of topics, which includes fully understanding both what is stated, as well as what is inferred.

#### LEVEL 4

Signers at this proficiency level are able to demonstrate spontaneous elaboration on all familiar and most unfamiliar topics, however, there is incorporation of language patterns other than those of the target language. They are able to use an array of rhetoric (narration, description, argument, and hypothesis) with complex topics in paragraph-length discourse related to employment, current events, and matters of public and community interest. Although they command a good number of grammatical features, they are deficient in some areas such as cohesion, non-manual signals (NMS), and depiction. They are able to present information with sufficient accuracy, clarity, and vocabulary selection to convey intended meaning without misrepresentation or confusion. Comprehension is very good with demonstration of confidence in the discussion of most complex topics.

#### LEVEL 3

Signers at this proficiency level are able to express language with sufficient structural accuracy and vocabulary to participate in most familiar and unfamiliar topics about practical, social, and professional situations. They can discuss particular interests with reasonable ease. They demonstrate confidence discussing topics at the paragraph discourse level, but exhibit errors and

breakdown when in-depth elaboration and detail is requested. Occasional groping for vocabulary can be present. There is good control of grammar but there are some noticeable imperfections and errors which may interfere with understanding. They tend to function reactively by responding to direct questions or requests for information. They are capable of asking a variety of questions when needed to gather information pertaining to certain situations. They may combine and recombine known language elements to create short paragraph length responses. Their language contains pauses and self-corrections as they search for adequate vocabulary and language forms. Comprehension is often accurate with highly familiar and predictable topics although misunderstandings may occur.

## **LEVEL 2**

Signers at this proficiency level are able to express uncomplicated communicative tasks in straightforward practical and social situations. They demonstrate the ability to elaborate on concrete and familiar topics (e.g., current events, work, family, autobiographical) with some confidence. They can also discuss with hesitancy some unfamiliar topics, relying on learned phrases, recombinations, and circumlocution. Sentences are discrete and are influenced by language patterns other than those of the target language with noticeable errors, ranging from occasional to considerable, affecting clarity. They may display self-repair ability. They are able to respond to simple, direct questions or requests for basic information. Their responses are short and may leave sentences incomplete. If asked to handle a variety of topics, accuracy cannot be maintained. Comprehension is good with familiar topics but frequent repetition and/or rephrasing are needed with unfamiliar topics.

## **LEVEL 1**

Signers at this proficiency level are able to manage a number of uncomplicated communicative tasks in straightforward practical situations. Conversation is restricted to some concrete exchanges and predictable topics necessary for survival. Due to influence by non-target language, short sentences are primarily used which are sometimes inaccurate and/or incomplete in the present. Language may be hesitant, inaccurate or recombined. Limited vocabulary is apparent and memorized phrases at the elementary level are demonstrated (e.g., routine travel needs, minimum courtesy requirements, work, school, pets, hobbies). They resort to repetitive vocabulary or short utterances. They demonstrate sporadic confidence with frequent groping for vocabulary. They can understand simple questions and statements, but slowed communication and extralinguistic support are needed from the interviewer. Comprehension requires frequent repetition but misunderstanding may still occur.

## **LEVEL 0**

Signers at this proficiency level demonstrate no functional language ability and may be unintelligible. Given adequate time and familiar cues, they may be able to exchange greetings, provide limited background information, and identify a number of familiar objects from their immediate environment. They use memorized vocabulary. In the absence of needed vocabulary, they resort to fingerspelling or silence. Comprehension is limited or almost non-existent even with the most simplified and slow communication.

## APPENDIX B

### COMPARISON OF THE ASLPI RATING LEVELS

There are patterns in how each level is different. In the first line, it describes what a signer can do with the language in particular situations. For Level 2, signers can express themselves only in “uncomplicated” practical and social situations. Level 3 signers can do more, with emphasis on familiar and unfamiliar topics to practical, social, and professional situations. They can do most but not all topics. However, in Level 4 signers, they can do more, citing a line saying, “able to demonstrate spontaneous elaboration on all familiar and most unfamiliar topics, yet they do not always maintain correct language patterns at all times.”

What the signers can discuss in a given topic is being measured next. For Level 2 signers, they can discuss topics related to current events, work, family, and about themselves with some confidence. For Level 3 signers, more emphasis on confidence is used as compared to Level 2, and they can converse with “reasonable ease”. With further inquiry, these signers will exhibit errors in message delivery. While Level 4 signers do not mention any type of confidence, they are said to be able to exhibit different types of discourse, with complexity, and with longer narratives.

Level 4 signers are said to have some deficiencies including cohesion, non-manual signals, and depiction. It is interesting to note that depiction is a broad term that can explain how one uses classifiers, role shifting, and use of space. The second language feature, non-manual signals, is also a broad topic to include different features other than signs themselves. There could be a correlation between depiction and non-manual signals, and its breakdown will affect the cohesiveness of a given narrative. That being said, it is assumed that Level 3 and Level 2 will exhibit more errors in these areas. Level 3 signers are said to have errors that can affect with understanding their message while there is none for Level 4 signers. Level 2 used the words, “occasional to considerable” clarity issues in their delivery.

Lengthy narratives seemed to be in play with different levels. Level 2 signers are shown to have “discrete sentences” exhibiting that they are not always explained more in detail. They can also give short answers and can also be incomplete. Level 3 signers are able to create short paragraph length responses. The Level 4 signers are able to express themselves on the “paragraph-length discourse”. This appears to show the limitations each level has in what they can express with a particular topic. For example, Level 2 signers would “rely on learned phrases, recombination, and circumlocution.” It may not be as apparent as in Level 3 and Level 4 signers.

The signers’ comprehension of the evaluator’s questions seems to be an important part of their assessment. Level 2 signers are said to be good with familiar topics, but frequent repetition may occur with unfamiliar topics. They will not be able to recognize everything that is being said. Level 3 signers would be able to understand most, if not all, conversation between themselves and the evaluator. It is possible that misunderstandings may occur based on certain signs and phrases that are unfamiliar to them. For Level 4 signers, their comprehension is shown to be “very good” in most complex topics.

The ASLPI proficiency levels for each level shows certain differences in how well they can present themselves and understand a given dialogue in the target language. They also indicate that for each plus value (+), it “doesn’t represent a midway point between the two levels”. If the signer is given a 2+ Level rating, that might mean that the signer exceeds the requirements for a Level 2 rating but fell short of a few key concepts needed for a Level 3 rating. It is possible that if these signers are given proper guidance, they can fix these gaps and move up to the next level.