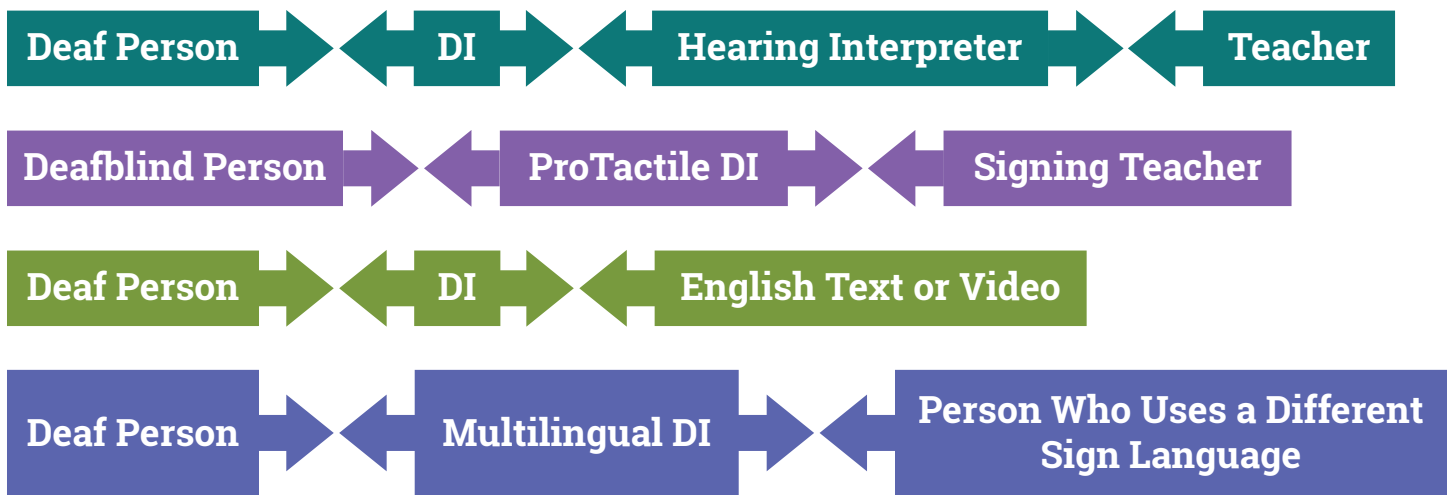![NDC National Deaf Center on Postsecondary Outcomes]

Best Practices in Access: Deaf Interpreters

Deaf interpreters (DIs) are deaf individuals who provide interpreting services, translation, translanguaging, and transliteration services in signed languages, including American Sign Language (ASL), other signed languages, and various forms of visual and tactile communication for deaf[1] individuals.[2,3,4,5] DIs are often used in medical, legal, and educational settings.[6] DIs also provide access for deafblind people, translate from one signed language to another,[7,8] and work as a language model for people learning sign language. DIs are also a good fit for stage or platform interpreting, as they are highly effective at relaying information during televised news broadcasts.[9,10]

DIs bring their lived experience as a deaf person to interpreting work. The combination of language proficiency, cultural knowledge, and lived experience allows DIs to work effectively and reduce common communication barriers. In many cases, DIs provide representative message equivalency while fully including the unique features of ASL. DIs can individualize services to provide a good fit for the people with whom they work, and for the context.

DIs often work in teams with hearing interpreters but also work across a range of interpreting situations.[11,12] Some example scenarios of typical deaf interpreting arrangements are as follows.

| Deaf Person | → ← | DI | → ← | Hearing Interpreter | → ← | Teacher |

| Deafblind Person | → ← | ProTactile DI | → ← | Signing Teacher |

| Deaf Person | → ← | DI | → ← | English Text or Video |

| Deaf Person | → ← | Multilingual DI | → ← | Person Who Uses a Different Sign Language |

Role of DIs in Education

DIs can play an important role in equitable access for deaf students in educational settings.[13] DIs can provide greater ease of access for deaf students and reduce the need for deaf students to accommodate hearing interpreters' varying language proficiency.[14] Deaf students can then spend their time and energy focusing on content learning and engaging with their peers, instead of monitoring the interpretation. The following sections provide information about specific contexts where DIs may be a good fit.

Testing and Accommodations

In some cases, DIs are used as specific accommodations during tests or in classrooms.[15] DIs can provide equitable access to tests, such as verbal assessments of receptive and expressive language skills. The use of DIs can lead to more accurate assessments of content knowledge and learning of students who experience language deprivation. DIs can also provide ASL translations for course materials such as English texts or prerecorded captioned lectures.

ProTactile Interpreting and Atypical Signers

DIs can provide access for deafblind students through ProTactile interpreting and provide access for students with atypical sign production. Deafdisabled people with limited mobility or sign production may benefit from DIs, who can use their stronger receptive skills to make meaning from incomplete sign production. DIs are also used to great effect with individuals with atypical language use as a result of delayed or inaccessible language exposure, inadequate education, or language deprivation.

Language Modeling for Emergent and Foreign-Born Signers
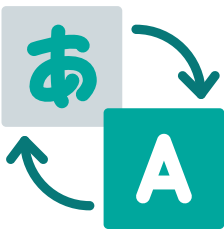
DIs can be language models for deaf students who are not yet fluent in ASL. Deaf students learning sign language, known as emergent signers, learn better, quicker, and more accurately from a native user of the language.[16] From elementary school to the university level, DIs can support deaf students who do not have access to fluent language models.[17]

A subgroup within emergent signers are foreign-born deaf people learning ASL as new immigrants[18] or recent refugees.[19,20] Foreign-born deaf individuals not fluent in ASL may be proficient users of other sign languages. A multilingual DI can support the navigation of multiple sign languages to facilitate the transition to ASL and content learning in another sign language. The use of DIs and deaf mentors with deaf immigrants and refugees has become more widespread in recent years.[21]

Community, Cultural, and Contextual Knowledge

DIs have lived experiences and cultural knowledge that are developed outside of interpreter training programs, including knowledge of regional dialects, slang words, and signs particular to a given region, race and ethnicity, or age group. One example is Black ASL, used among the Black deaf community.[22] A DI with cultural experience in a specific community can work appropriately and accurately with students from that community.

High-Stakes Situations and Legal Proceedings

The lived experience and knowledge of DIs are particularly important when interpreting in high-stakes situations where word choice and context can make a difference in outcomes, such as legal settings or certification tests. In the legal system, many states have recognized the value of DIs[23] by including definitions and standards in court interpreting statutes.[24,25] For legal or disciplinary situations in educational settings, it is often appropriate to use a DI to provide full and appropriate access.[26] When considering transition planning, remember that the individualized education program is a legal process and thus may benefit from a DI when appropriate. Other high-stakes situations in educational settings include disciplinary proceedings, mental health crises, campus safety conflicts, certification tests, and interactions with medical or social services.

Certification and Qualification of DIs

Recruiting, hiring, and evaluating the qualifications of DIs is complex. Very few certified DIs work in the field due to multiple barriers to certification. These barriers include fewer training programs, flaws in the certification process, bias toward English proficiency in assessments, the emerging nature of the deaf interpreting profession, and a lack of job opportunities. Many highly trained and skilled DIs work in the field without certification. When recruiting and hiring DIs, certification should not be the only factor—consider skills, content expertise, work history, and lived experiences.

Conclusion

DIs provide access in many different ways to ensure equitable access for deaf people. This work can include providing ProTactile signs for deafblind people, modeling language for deaf people learning sign language, and interpreting between different signed languages. DIs should be considered in a range of settings, especially where content knowledge is critical, as deaf students can spend less time accommodating hearing interpreters or checking interpretations. DIs should be an important component in your accessibility toolkit.

Additional Resources

Below is a selected list of resources for more information on DIs.

- National Deaf Interpreters (**facebook.com/nationalDI**)
- Certified Deaf Interpreters Facebook group (**facebook.com/groups/27049205802**)
- Deaf Interpreter Conference (**deafterpconf.com**)
- Deaf Interpreter Institute (**diinstitute.org**)
- Deaf Interpreter Curriculum (**diinstitute.org/learning-center/deaf-interpreter-curriculum**)
- Gallaudet University Regional Interpreter Education Center: DIs (**gallaudet.edu/department-of-interpretation-and-translation/gallaudet-university-regional-interpreter-education-center/programs-and-projects/deaf-interpreters**)
- Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf search (**myaccount.rid.org/Public/Search/Member.aspx**)

Notes and References

1. The National Deaf Center uses the term *deaf* in an all-inclusive manner to include people who identify as deaf, deafblind, deafdisabled, hard of hearing, late-deafened, and hearing impaired. NDC recognizes that for many individuals, identity is fluid and can change over time or with setting. NDC has chosen to use one term, *deaf*, to recognize the shared experiences of our diverse communities while also honoring our differences.

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