

Best Practices in Access:

# Interpreter Consistency



## **Interpreter consistency**

is a key element in ensuring effective access and effective communication for deaf<sup>1</sup> people who use interpreters. Consistency in interpreting has many positive outcomes, such as continuity, shared contextual knowledge, improved message accuracy, greater trust between the interpreter and the deaf person, and improved content knowledge that builds from each session to the next.<sup>2</sup>

Consistency in interpreting and continuity for all participants can be achieved through the use of designated interpreters who are assigned to a specific job on an ongoing basis, to a specific setting, or with a specific client. Designated interpreters are most often used in medical and healthcare settings<sup>3,4</sup> but are beneficial for effective communication access across a range of settings.

## Benefits of Consistent Interpreters

**Improved message accuracy** due to familiarity with the following:

- Linguistic requirements in jargon-heavy fields such as medicine and law<sup>5</sup>
- Contextual content from interaction to interaction
- Context-driven demeanor and tone to best fit the situation
- Relationships and power dynamics among participants<sup>6</sup>
- Terminology in specific fields<sup>7</sup>

**Enhanced rapport and trust** among participants.

- Repeated encounters allow participants to build trust in the interpreter's competence and develop a working relationship
- Interpreters who work together more frequently are more likely to make repairs and actively monitor their co-interpreters
- Relationship-building improves communication access and thus has taken on greater importance in the healthcare industry<sup>8</sup>
- A good relationship between a deaf professional and a designated interpreter allows the deaf professional to socialize fully in the workplace<sup>9</sup>

**Maintenance of the deaf person's goals and preferences.**

- Better understanding of what the deaf individual hopes to achieve
- More opportunities to have conversations about goals and preferences
- Increased familiarity with context
- Better understanding of specific needs and access considerations, including communication styles and preferences
- Effective work as a team between the interpreter and the deaf person

**Reduced hidden labor** for deaf people allows them to focus on other priorities. Benefits include the following:

- Interpreters are prepared and familiar with the content
- Interpreters are more likely to be more accurate with message and linguistics
- Interpreters are better prepared with relevant background and contextual information
- Interpreters are familiar with relationships and power dynamics among participants

## Role of Consistent or Designated Interpreters in Education

Research shows that consistent or designated interpreters have many benefits for students specific to education, including improved content knowledge and greater ease in communicating or expressing content knowledge. In addition, consistent or designated interpreters have background information from previous courses and contexts.<sup>10</sup> Content often builds from one course to the next, and designated interpreters can provide higher-quality interpretations based on this knowledge.

When interpreters do not have technical expertise, content knowledge, or institutional awareness, the risk of misrepresentation or errors in interpretation increases.<sup>3</sup> These errors negatively affect access and performance for students. When designated interpreters are used, **deaf students can focus on being students** instead of managing issues that arise from inconsistent interpreting. It is crucial for institutions to work with deaf students to ensure a good fit between the deaf student and the interpreter.

## Specialized and Technical Coursework

Interpreting complex technical concepts often requires foundational knowledge of the subject. Experienced interpreters with content knowledge are more equipped to interpret effectively in highly specialized fields of study, as they understand the jargon and other complexities specific to a field.

All kinds of courses benefit from having a consistent interpreter. Institutions should have a list of interpreters with experience in various courses and subjects in addition to typical notes and information about each interpreter. For example, an interpreter with an engineering background would be ideal for engineering-related courses.

## Fit Between the Interpreter and the Deaf Person

Deaf students are highly diverse in language usage, identity, race, ethnicity, and additional disabilities. Their interpreters should be just as diverse.

Efforts to provide consistent interpreting need to consider student characteristics and the fit between interpreters and deaf people. Deaf people who use signed languages may have different home languages that influence their language use in academic or professional settings, use different signed languages (e.g., Protactile ASL, Black ASL,<sup>11</sup> Lengua de Señas Mexicana), or present atypical signed language production.<sup>12</sup>

Designated and consistent interpreters will be able to better accommodate language variations, validate language experiences, and provide needed consistency. For example, deafblind and deafdisabled students would benefit from not having to educate each new interpreter, each session, about their communication preferences.

While accommodating language variation and communication preferences is important, institutions should also think about cultural fit and sensitivity to context. Consistent and designated interpreters who share cultural or identity backgrounds with their deaf clients can build stronger relationships and be more effective.<sup>13,14,15</sup> For example, a Black deaf student enrolled in a Black studies course would benefit from having a Black designated interpreter in the classroom.<sup>16,17</sup>

## A Model to Follow: Legal and Healthcare Settings

In legal and healthcare settings, designated interpreters are used to a great degree. Qualified designated interpreters are crucial to ensure the integrity of legal processes and proceedings. There are relevant credentials in terms of legal interpreting, as well as important factors to consider, such as experience, education, training, and background.

Legal interpreters prepare extensively before interpreting a trial, court or legal proceeding, or deposition. This preparation, along with the detailed knowledge of the case gained as the proceedings unfold, has a positive effect on the interpreter's ability to interpret accurately and effectively for a deaf individual or party to a case.

Specific to the postsecondary setting, for the benefits listed above, finding a qualified legal interpreter for law school classes or similar situations would be ideal, as the interpreter will have extensive knowledge of terminology and context.

The same concepts and principles for legal interpreting often apply to healthcare settings, where designated interpreters are also used to great effect. There are certifications and training specific to healthcare situations, among other qualifications. Interpreters with experience in healthcare settings are often the best choice when a student is navigating healthcare systems or taking healthcare-related courses. These designated, qualified healthcare interpreters are important, especially when interpreting complex and technical information.<sup>3,4</sup>

## Be Aware of Legal Obligations

Institutions should ensure that all interpreters have appropriate credentials (e.g., certification, licensure) and extensive training. Recognizing a student's subjective experience while also objectively evaluating an interpreter's knowledge, skills, and abilities can help determine whether the interpreter is qualified to work in various postsecondary settings.

Ineffective working relationships between a deaf student and interpreters can result in barriers to communication for all involved. Institutions have an obligation to ensure effective communication access for deaf students. Generally speaking, honor a student's specific request for designated interpreters as part of an overall commitment to providing effective services.

To ensure effective communication services, an interpreter must be "qualified" to provide services in a particular context for the particular student. The U.S. Department of Justice has defined "qualified interpreter" as one who is able to interpret effectively, accurately, and impartially, both receptively and

expressively, using any necessary specialized vocabulary.<sup>18</sup>

NDC's Equitable Access Guide<sup>19</sup> refers to two U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights complaints that address when a deaf student requests a specific interpreter or expresses concerns about not receiving effective communication access from an interpreter and the importance of collecting feedback:

- *Mandi Hayden v. Redwood Community College District (2007)*<sup>20</sup>
- *A Letter to Santa Ana College (2012)*<sup>21</sup>

The main takeaway from these cases and other legal obligations is that students often have the right to reject specific interpreters who do not have the skills necessary for effective communication access. Be sure to work with students to determine the effectiveness of accommodations, such as interpreting services. The deaf student often knows best what is most effective for them.

Consistent and designated interpreters often have the skills needed to provide effective communication access, as they have the relevant knowledge, certifications, education, and experience.

## Conclusion

The consistency and qualifications of interpreters are important considerations when satisfying effective communication legal requirements. Consistent, qualified interpreters can improve access and accommodations for deaf students, instructors, and staff members. More specifically, building rapport and deepening knowledge of context and material improve the experience and effectiveness of interpreters as an accommodation.

Consistent, designated, qualified, and experienced interpreters can also improve outcomes in many other contexts due to their previous knowledge and foundational experience. When considering effective and appropriate access, the deaf individual is often the best judge of what accommodations are most effective. Therefore, including the deaf individual in each part of the process of recruiting, hiring, evaluating, training, and retaining interpreters is critical to student success.

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