"Certified Deaf Interpreter—WHY?"

By Reginald J. Egnatovich, Pennsylvania, CDI-P, SC:L

Please read this article with an open mind. The intention of this article is to introduce a different strategy for how to use Certified Deaf Interpreters (CDI). This article does not mean to offend hearing interpreters, or to insult deaf interpreters that have the Reverse Skills Certificate (RSC). It will give different perspectives for both hearing and deaf interpreters to think about. It will explain the concept and the processing of what a Certified Deaf Interpreter’s role should be. I will use the process of interpreting (going from sign language to target language, keeping integrity of message and equivalency of message while maintaining neutrality and following the Code of Ethics) and linguistic study of American Sign Language as several examples.

Historically, hearing interpreters have been accustomed to using deaf interpreters with the RSC. Some RSC holders have the proper training. However, some of them did not have any training. Thus, it is a risky situation for the hearing interpreters who work with poorly trained teammates. Most of the RSC holders received training to become raters/evaluate hearing interpreters.

Now there is more training available for deaf interpreters. More deaf interpreters have applied for the CDI-P with an enthusiastic outlook for this professionalism. There is not much work for them, but they have pursued more work. They have been trying to convince hearing consumers and hearing interpreters that they are capable of doing the work. We know this is a new concept to some people, and the financial impact is another matter. Deaf interpreters feel as if they are shut off from the opportunity to gain experience as deaf interpreters. The only job they can seek to secure their bread and butter is to teach at interpreter training programs.

“Oh, Certified Deaf Interpreters are there only for deaf people with minimal language skills or whenever I need them!” many hearing interpreter may say. However, the hearing interpreters have completely forgotten about the grassroots population. What about the deaf children, deaf mental health patients and deaf patients in hospital emergency rooms? Deaf/hearing teams are very useful with those who have very strong American Sign Language skills. Many of us are not aware of or know the other possible sequences to make the communication more efficient, and success in message relaying system.

Because it is a new field, we know misunderstandings occur. We were not thoroughly acquainted with how to use deaf interpreters in the past. While the concept is not new, many are not familiar with it. There are few printed materials about deaf/hearing teams. The topic has not been included in most interpreter training programs. If we have the information and include it in the training programs, we will have a different perspective and different feelings/attitude about it.

Deaf interpreter, how, when and where to use them

For most hearing interpreters, they would envision the following: “I can sign very well and I can understand them very well, so there is no need for deaf interpreter to be present.” Or some of them feel demoted to have a certified deaf interpreter working with them. Or some feel intimidat-

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ed, or even feel downgraded and or insulted. These feelings are understandable. They would not have those unnecessary feelings, however, if they did have proper training that would give them a different perspective and proper knowledge of how to use Certified Deaf Interpreters. That’s a perfectly understandable feeling among those interpreters.

This article will mainly focus on five reasons of the importance of deaf/hearing team interpreting: “the double checking system,” “the grace period of time in the thinking processing,” “monitoring one another for affect and neutrality,” “the deaf consumer’s right to know what has been interpreted,” and “the comfort usage of their language.”

The Double Checking System

When the hearing interpreter hears a question and signs it to the deaf interpreter, the hearing interpreter has the opportunity to check if the message is the same when the deaf interpreter signs the question to the deaf consumer. The hearing interpreter can also watch the deaf consumer’s answer and then watch the deaf interpreter before voicing the answer. Not only does this processing allow for the double checking, it also ensures the conveyance of the full integrity of message.

The deaf consumer also has the advantage to check if his/her message has been delivered properly by double-checking as the deaf interpreter relays the message to the hearing interpreter. This method will make the communication much more accurate. In addition, the consumer cannot blame the interpreters for their misunderstanding or misinterpretation.

The Grace Period of Time in the Thinking Processing

For the purposes of this discussion I will use the term “grace period” for the time in which a message is being relayed through a deaf/hearing team. Many deaf consumers appreciate this extra time. He/she can follow the interpretation of the message, thereby having more time to formulate a response. The grace period also is an advantage for the hearing interpreter because they have the opportunity to observe the answer twice. This then speeds up their processing time while interpreting. It also gives the deaf/hearing interpreters the opportunity to trust his/her intuition if the message gets across clearly. Its importance is to have pace in the interpretation processing, and benefits both consumer and interpreters.

Monitor Each Other for Affect and Neutrality

Often if the setting is fast paced, the hearing or even the deaf interpreter will not correctly convey the speaker’s affect. In these situations, the affect/neutrality is either diminished or exaggerated. It then becomes crucial that the team of deaf/hearing interpreters carefully observe one another to ensure accurate interpretations of both content and affect. This will in turn ensure maximum adherence to the Code of Ethics and will earn respect from deaf and hearing consumers. The “trust” and “feedback” within the team of Deaf/hearing interpreters are the most important “tools” of workmanship in the interpreters field.

The Deaf Consumer’s Right to Know What Has Been Interpreted

The deaf consumer tends to have good rapport with and respect for the deaf interpreter. It does not mean the Certified Deaf Interpreter should be their advocate. The Certified Deaf Interpreter should not be biased. Their duty is to interpret the message that would be appropriate for the deaf person’s level of communication. When the deaf consumer signs out, he/she will observe the Certified Deaf Interpreter’s relaying the message. If the deaf interpreter should make a mistake, the deaf consumer will be able to correct the information. The deaf consumer usually leaves the assignment with much more satisfaction. They respect our work. This is yet another way we know that the interpretation is more accurate.

The Comfort Usage of Their Language

When a deaf consumer meets a hearing interpreter, they tend to figure out what to say. They tend to worry about their English, and try very hard to express themselves to avoid the possibility of misunderstanding and or misinterpretation. With the certified deaf interpreter’s presence, they are more related and feel some relief. They usually express themselves more freely without any worry. This procedure makes the whole interpreting assignment more successful and pleasant. The bottom line for those deaf people who are interested in becoming Certified Deaf Interpreters is that they should sign up for courses and training. Do not think “Oh, I know sign language and I don’t have to study.” AGAIN, it’s very important that you know how to interpret and have the skill to work hearing interpreters. I will use the process of interpreting (going from sign language to target language, keeping the integrity of the message and equivalency of the message, while maintaining neutrality and following the Code of Ethics) and linguistic study of American Sign Language as several examples. Not only the processing, or knowing your own sign language, you will have to learn the terminology/signing of various settings, such as mental health vocabularies, legal terminology, and many other areas. ■
Who Needs a Deaf Interpreter? I Do!

By Tiffany J. Burns, CI and CT, Illinois

Suppose I was fluent in German and travelling through Europe. I decide to spend the night in a remote village of the Swiss Alps. While trying to negotiate a price for the room, I find that the innkeeper speaks a different dialect of Swiss-German that I’ve never heard before. Sure, I can pick out a few words here and there from the German I learned in high school or college. But, I just can’t quite understand what the innkeeper is saying. Is he telling me there are no vacancies? Is he quoting me a price? For all I know, he is telling me I must bathe out back with the sheep! In order to get a decent price for the room (or a room at all) it would behoove me to find a native German speaker to explain to me exactly what the innkeeper is saying. 

Hearing interpreters often encounter a variety of similar situations that could best be served through the use of a Deaf interpreter. It is important to acknowledge from the onset that it is the hearing interpreter who needs the services of a Deaf interpreter.

Knowing this, there is some debate over whose responsibility it is to ask for a Deaf interpreter. Ultimately, as in any situation, the choice of the Deaf consumer must always take precedence. That aside, the hearing interpreter must establish clear and effective communication with the Deaf consumer prior to proceeding to interpret between the two parties. If the hearing interpreter is unable to do this for whatever reason, it is that interpreter’s responsibility and ethical obligation to either ask for a Deaf interpreter or not continue with the assignment. The sign of a true professional is an interpreter who recognizes their strengths and weaknesses and chooses work accordingly.

I have noticed paranoia among many hearing interpreters, that in asking for a Deaf interpreter, they will appear unqualified or incompetent. I cannot stress enough what a misconception that is. When I see a hearing interpreter request a Deaf interpreter, I admire their self-awareness. As far as I am concerned, it is the responsible course of action to take when an interpreter feels in over their head. I would say that not asking for help when appropriate probably accounts for the majority of miscommunication occurring on an assignment, thus leading to the rendering of an inaccurate interpretation or message.

When teaming with a competent Deaf interpreter, I welcome the opportunity to learn new communication approaches. It becomes a shared responsibility. If there is a Deaf interpreter there, and we both agree on the message output, I have more confidence in the process and am less likely to second guess myself. I believe that we share an equal responsibility to inform parties if there is a misunderstanding on the part of the hearing interpreter or Deaf interpreter. There also seems to be an added dimension to the art of cultural mediation. The hearing interpreter becomes responsible for explaining the “hearing perspective” to the Deaf parties involved, including the Deaf interpreter. By the same token, the Deaf interpreter has a duty to educate the hearing parties, including the hearing interpreter, to the Deaf Experience. It is imperative during all of this cultural mediation that the team works as a team, presenting a united front in which they clearly show their support for each other.

This is where a “chemistry” between interpreters becomes crucial. Many will agree that this “chemistry” applies to all interpreting teams, hearing or Deaf. It is important the interpreters have a mutual understanding in which they can both provide and accept feedback and assistance in a non-defensive manner.

In my experience, the “perfect” Deaf interpreter is adept in many areas, often the same as me. They have training, not necessarily through a formal training program (although desirable), through attending workshops and mentoring with other interpreters. They are articulate in both English and ASL. They have a strong sense of cultural awareness, both in the hearing and Deaf worlds, and can navigate those worlds smoothly, so as not to offend anyone. They are aware of their ethical boundaries. I was most impressed when a Deaf person who could have been an excellent Deaf interpreter told me that he had tried, but could not due to a gut instinct to advocate during the situation. He realized he was more effective in his role as a consumer advocate than making ethical compromises as a Deaf interpreter. Self-policing on that level is commendable and should be the norm.

Deaf/hearing team interpreting provides yet another opportunity to level the playing field between our cultures and languages. I am very excited to see the CDI certification process being revamped. It is as important to me that I work with skilled, trained Deaf interpreters as it is for Deaf consumers to expect the same qualities from their hearing interpreters. It is well known that unqualified hearing interpreters lacking credentials can be very dangerous, and I believe the same applies to Deaf interpreters as well. Deaf interpreting is a phenomenon that has been occurring long before it received its due recognition from the field at large. I see Deaf/hearing team interpreting as an up and coming trend in the field. In the future I hope to see hearing interpreters “roll up their sleeves” and become more educated about the Deaf/hearing team interpreting process. I would encourage any hearing interpreter to learn more about not only the teamwork process, but also what makes a qualified Deaf interpreter just as we urge consumers to become knowledgeable about what constitutes a qualified hearing interpreter.