

# Supplemental Guidelines for American Sign Language (ASL) in the Video Sign Language (VSL) Test Version

## Standardized testing

In the United States, standardized testing is the avenue to many opportunities such as education and employment (McDowell, 1992; Olmedo, 1981). Students are tested to determine grading, academic placement, college admission, and employment readiness (Mason, 2005). Test scores are the vehicles that allow individuals to progress toward their destinations.

Unfortunately, standardized tests that are neither designed for, nor normed on deaf students frequently provide barriers to such destinations. Instruments that are culturally and/or linguistically insensitive to deaf students may provide results that inaccurately represent this population (Mason, 2005). The most common accommodation is the Educational Interpreter (EI), providing access to test items in real time.

## Testing challenges

The construction of standardized tests may be problematic for deaf and hard-of-hearing candidates in any of the following ways (Mounty, 2010; Martin, 2010):

- The overall style of language used in testing is very specialized.
- Vocabulary is often not used in everyday conversation or written material.
- Grammatical constructions are difficult to decode.
- Sufficient context isn't provided in the test stem.
- Questions are asked with inappropriate content (i.e., music, English rhyme structures, onomatopoeia).

## Interpreter challenges

Providing an interpretation of standardized testing is one accommodation that can be made for deaf and hard-of-hearing students. There are challenges inherent in this approach including:

- **Standardization of the standardized test.**  
If the test is interpreted live more than a single time, it is no longer standardized as the interpreter will produce different utterances in each instance. If the translation is prerecorded, the standardization remains intact. This approach, however, requires an investment of time, energy, and financial resources.
- **Security of the test.**  
If an interpreter familiar with the student receives a copy of the test to use for preparation, special precautions may need to be taken to ensure the security of the test is not compromised. Some states require the interpreter live in another locale to ensure

test security. However, this presents a new challenge as the interpreter is unlikely to be familiar with the signs used locally.

- **Interpreter familiarity with the content being tested.**

The interpreter needs to know and/or understand the content being tested in order to translate and present the material appropriately. This doesn't mean the interpreter always needs to know the correct answer though sometimes it is useful to know why the incorrect answers are right/wrong to avoid accidental cueing.

- **Interpreter fluency in ASL and American Deaf Culture, and ability to interpret.**

The interpreter needs to be fluent in ASL in order to be able to render complex test stems accurately in a visual form that candidates will understand. Likewise, the interpreter needs to be knowledgeable about the linguistic differences between ASL and English, and knowledgeable about American Deaf Culture in order to speak to items that may be culturally insensitive to deaf and hard-of-hearing candidates.

## **Preparation**

Gile (2009) stresses that often interpreters/translators have no training in the field, however, they're "required to perform highly creative work...Poems or other literary texts...specialized information...scientific and technical translations" (p.5). He goes on to state that the level of translation training for an individual should parallel the level of complexity in the work. For example, a classroom interpreter translating Shakespeare should have education in understanding Shakespeare before attempting to translate. In short, "beyond translation competence, interpreters and translators need to meet some intellectual criteria" (p.10).

## **Planning to translate**

As has already been noted, standardized tests should be translated, which will require significantly more time than an on-the-fly interpretation. It is important to make certain enough time is allotted to complete a thorough translation (Patrie, 2001). Having enough time allows the EI to isolate translation problems and solve them prior to test administration, potentially minimizing the risk of error and loss with challenges in the source language.

Wherever possible, a team approach should be employed by EIs for consultation and draft review.

## **Translating step-by-step**

### **1. Source text analysis**

The first step in interpreting or translating is understanding the source-language message. One of the benefits of translation is *time*. Patrie (2001) points out that "The translator can find the main idea while reading through the text before translating it while the interpreter must figure out the main idea in real time... (p.55)."

## General comprehension

1. **Read all the test items.** This will provide an overview of the test and its content, starting with the big picture and working toward the details (Patrie, 2001). It is crucial that both the item and its goal be understood in order to formulate an accurate translation.
2. **Note any issues of comprehension.** List specific words or phrases that are challenging along with any subject-related content that may not be fully understood (e.g. math functions, science processes, events in history, etc.).
3. **Determine and list sources for research.** Take the time to front load research by finding and listing specific website URLs, reading materials with page numbers, and people with knowledge/expertise, including their contact information. Cross-reference sources with item numbers to reduce the amount of time spent during the actual translation process. You will find a list of ASL-specific resources that we use at the end of this document.

## Individual item analysis

1. **Understand each item.** This goes without saying: one cannot interpret what one cannot understand (Seleskovitch, 1978).
2. **Underline the topic and/or time marker in the stem.** Due to the complex nature of the language used in tests, starting with the time and topic allows for easier comprehension. Hint: The topic can often be found in a prepositional phrase.
3. **Double underline any secondary topics.** A secondary topic can be the actor responding in some way to the main topic, or additional specific detail about the main topic.
4. **Use arrows to indicate verb relationships.** Usually the arrow will start at the primary or secondary topic and move to a verb or verb phrase.
5. **Bracket adjectival phrases.** English uses adjectival phrases, often before the noun, for description purposes, e.g. "The exhausted, sweat covered man trudged his way home." In ASL, the adjectives general follow the noun, i.e. man, exhausted, sweaty...
6. **Box challenging or unfamiliar content.** This will draw attention to words with multiple possible meanings and/or sections that need more research.

e.g. Which statement best describes a function<sup>▼</sup> of the proteins embedded in the plasma membrane of cells?

e.g. Over one week, a snack booth at a fair sold 362 cans of soft drinks for \$1.75 each and 221 hot dogs for \$2.35 each.

e.g. What action did the British government take to stop colonial revolts?

e.g. The [exhausted, sweat covered] man trudged his way home.

e.g. When  $x^3 - 2x^2 - 15x$  is factored completely which expression is one of the factors?

## 2. Message transfer

Once the message is understood, the translator engages in a process of message transfer. This happens in the mind of the EI and is not observable, though inferences can be made about the process based on the end product (the translation itself). Seleskovitch (1982) and Colonomos (2016) analogize this as a process of removing the language from the message similar to unwrapping a gift. By starting with the speaker's point of view, or source frame, the wrapping (language) is noted and stripped away, leaving only the message in concepts, ideas, feelings, etc.

Switching to the audience's view, or target frame, issues of foregrounding/backgrounding (i.e. what to do with fictional names in math problems) and structural issues (e.g. passive-voice constructions) are noted to be addressed shortly.

### *Semantic adjustments*

When reformulating the message, attention must be paid to three types of relationships (Nida and Tabor, 1982).

- **Temporal relationships** involve conveying event occurrence, sequence, durations and lapses, and simultaneity. For example, English verbs inflect for tense, which allows for more flexibility in event occurrence than ASL where verbs do not convey past/present/future information.
- **Spatial relationships** can include information about location between objects, the text's point of view—i.e. who is speaking and their relationship to the information (Patrie, 2001), hierarchy of concepts, and unique to ASL is the ability to use spatial information to compare and contrast objects or ideas.

This is where the EI will need visualization skills to imagine where actual objects might be located, and where concepts could be placed. Once established, these items will be referred to “systematically and repeatedly” (p. 114, Patrie).

- **Logical relationships** convey information related to cause and effect, condition and consequence (conditional or if-then statements), purpose and accomplishment, etc.

As is the case with temporal relationships, English tends to have more flexibility in its structuring of logical relationships where ASL tends to favor a temporally correct arrangement.

e.g. English: We will cancel the picnic if it rains.

ASL: SUPPOSE RAIN, PICNIC IS-CANCELED.

## *Structural adjustments*

EIs often attempt to retain source-language structural elements though doing so often results in awkwardness, complete unintelligibility, or skewed meaning. Nida and Tabor (1982) point out the following discourse and sentence level adjustments that must be made:

- **Discourse level**

*Direct and indirect address:* English uses direct address less frequently in more formal registers, preferring it for casual discourse and storytelling (Marron, 1999). By contrast, ASL employs direct address much more often (Wilson, 1996; Marron, 1999), and in all registers (Armstrong, 2003).

*Temporal indication:* As noted earlier, ASL verbs do not inflect to indicate time. The EI needs to take special care to indicate occurrence early in the stem construction and continue to reestablish time markers as appropriate.

- **Sentence level**

*Active and passive constructions:* Tests focusing on history often use passive-voice constructions, which don't specify an actor. For example, "Africans were bought and sold as slaves," begs the question "by whom?". The ASL verbs TO-BUY and TO-SELL do not operate in a passive construction, so structural adjustments must be made to avoid a translation that appears to say, "AFRICA PEOPLE BUY, SELL SLAVE."

### **3. Target message formulation (drafting the translation)**

By this point, the EI should have considered a number of linguistic and communicative elements and have an original text or script with notations. Now it's time to draft a translation, which Patrie says is "the visible result of the analysis and transfer stages" (p.143).

#### *Semantic considerations*

- **Illocutionary force:** Patrie emphasizes, "The arrangement of information at the grammatical level of the source text lets us know if the text is a statement, question, rhetorical question, or exclamation...The translation must reflect the same discourse function [emphasis added] as the source message" (p.145). Sometimes this means a directive is restructured to ask a question:

e.g. English: Identify the maximum number of bonds one carbon atom can form.

ASL: ONE CARBON ATOM, SELF CAN BOND-TO+++ MAXIMUM, HOW-MANY?

- **Locations of actors, objects, and concepts:** Having considered placement issues in the transfer stage, the EI will now make choices about where to place items in the signing space with the goal of making relationships clear. Spatial decisions should take place before lexical considerations.

#### *Lexical considerations*

- **Word choices:** Ideally, the EI translating the test has had the benefit of being in the classroom with the student, so familiarity interpreting the instructional language will inform translation decisions.
- **Modulation:** Refers to a shift in viewpoint that does not affect the meaning of the original text (Bell, 1991):

e.g. English: There was no vacancy at the hotel.

ASL: HOTEL FINISH FULL.

Each EL will need to craft a translation system that makes sense to them. In the event that the work is recorded, it is recommended to use a teleprompter so the translation notations need to work on a computer. Strategies we have found successful are listed below.

- Use sentence case and regular punctuation to make the translation easier to read quickly.
- Reserve all caps for fingerspelled items.
- Add spatial location notation ahead of information.
- Use symbols. Examples include: to indicate a comparison, // for a pause, ++ for noun or verb reduplication.

e.g. English: Which statement best compares eukaryotic cells and prokaryotic cells?

ASL: ① EUKARYOTIC cell: ② PROKARYOTIC cell. // Question: Below sentence++, which compare them-2-cells best?

#### 4. Testing the translation

Whether the actual work will be recorded, EIs need to record their drafts. Review the recordings (and/or ideally have them reviewed by another EI) without the source text and check for the following:

- **Accuracy.** Will the student be able to ascertain the necessary information to respond to the question being asked?
- **Clarity.** Are the translations unambiguous (unless otherwise intended in the source), and are the signs clearly visible and intelligible?
- **Natural.** Have appropriate linguistic, grammatical, and spatial structures been used? The best translations don't look like a translation.

*A final word...*

We acknowledge that classroom interpreters are adept at identifying and accessing resources and supports as they work through a translation. Further, we acknowledge that the translation process is not a 1-2-3 step-by-step process. Interpreters and translators will not find a reliable guide to answer all of their questions regarding vocabulary choices and grammar constructions.

Experienced interpreters and translators report that there is a significant amount of trial and error mixed with intuitive decision-making necessary to produce a translated body of work. Even still, the final product may or may not satisfy the needs of the audience member(s) who are dependent upon the translation for information. For these reasons, we strongly encourage interpreters and translators to thoughtfully and carefully approach the work knowing that with time and experience, intuitive decision-making skills will develop.

## References and Resources

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## Resources

- ASL Clear ([aslclear.org](http://aslclear.org))
- ASL Core ([aslcore.org](http://aslcore.org))
- Dawn Sign Press ([dawnsign.com](http://dawnsign.com))
- Sign Media, Inc. & Linstok Press ([signmedia.com](http://signmedia.com))