

Interpreters as a Reasonable Accommodation for Testing

TS
Tip Sheet

Prior to reading this information it is recommended to first read [Sign Language Interpreters: An Introduction](#).

Overview

Regardless of one's role in administering an assessment—as a professor in a college course or a psychological examiner conducting an evaluation—test providers recognize the importance of obtaining an accurate measurement of student learning, knowledge, abilities, attitudes, and skills.

It is well known that the language and structure of tests can present barriers to those who do not have a strong language base in English. In fact, extensive psychometric protocols are always employed when high-stakes tests (e.g., personality tests, college entrance exams) are developed because test outcomes are influenced by the test taker's language proficiency and cultural experiences.

Though academic course exams usually do not undergo such psychometric scrutiny, the goals are the same—to accurately assess the student's learning rather than language and test-taking abilities.

Do deaf individuals experience English language challenges?

Though not every deaf individual struggles with the English language, it is not uncommon for some individuals to experience difficulty mastering English. Challenges in English language acquisition occur for a variety of reasons.

A deaf child's first exposure to English may not occur until enrollment in school, with little or no previous incidental learning. With only approximately 30% of English sounds being visible on the lips, learning English orally (rather than as a second language) can result in gaps. The construct of English has little similarity to American Sign Language (ASL) in that English is a linear language rooted in phonetics, where one sound follows another sound, not unlike the cars of a train. Conversely, ASL is a visual language that uses space to convey concepts.

According to Gallaudet University, deaf students are second-language English users, with the second language using a different alphabet. Linguist Jill Morford states that “anyone who has a first language that has a written system that's very different than English, like Arabic or Chinese or Russian, knows that learning to recognize and understand words in English is much more challenging than if you already speak a language that uses the same orthography.”¹

Is providing an interpreter for testing considered an expected reasonable accommodation?

Although providing a sign language interpreter in this setting is considered a reasonable accommodation, there is no simple answer to this question. It depends on the purpose of the test, assignment, or other activity; the type and complexity of the course content; and the individual's language proficiency and academic experience. Accommodations should be granted on a test-by-test basis centered on these factors.



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What are some examples of when and how to provide signed tests?

In all cases, an interpreter should be available in the classroom (or testing site) to interpret instructions, new information, and comments from the instructor, as well as questions posed by students, including the deaf student.

Whether an interpreter should be used to interpret test items depends on a number of factors pertaining to the test's purpose.

- **Does the test measure content knowledge?** If the purpose is to measure content knowledge (e.g., the fall of the Alamo), a signed-language-administered test should be considered. In the case of multiple-choice, true/false, and short-answer questions, the interpreter signs the questions and the student writes answers on the test or answer sheet. In the case of essay questions, one option is for the student to video record live responses and then one or more highly qualified interpreters voice the video when the response is being scored.
- **Does the test measure reading skills?** If the purpose is to measure skill in reading, specifically decoding English text, no interpreting of the test item should be provided. However, a gray area often exists when there is also a reading comprehension task that relies on how an individual analyzes and uses written text to arrive at an answer. In this instance, creativity may be needed to determine how to make this type of test question accessible without losing its validity.
- **Does the test measure written English expression?** If the purpose is to measure skills in written English expression, no accommodation should be provided. This is the case in many state assessments of language proficiency. The prompt should be provided via an interpreter, but the student response should be in written English without an interpreter.

Institutions and agencies' policies for interpreting tests vary greatly. The goal of these policies, though, is consistent: to achieve equal access while ensuring that the administration of the test in another language (ASL) does not compromise the validity of the score.

Are there other factors to consider for interpreting tests?

Currently, there are no universal or best-practice models or policies for the process of interpreting tests. However, it is important to keep in mind the following:

- Use only interpreters with strong fluency in both ASL and English who are familiar with the test content and terminology, including acronyms.
- Use a check-and-balance system, such as team interpreting, to promote linguistic accuracy and interpreter neutrality in the process.
- Work with the interpreter to determine what content can be interpreted and how it should be presented.

Related Resources

- Test Equity: Summit Publications:
www.nationaldeafcenter.org/testpublications
- Higgins, J. A., Famularo, L., Cawthon, S. W., Kurz, C. A., Reis, J. E., & Moers, L. M. (2016). Development of American Sign Language guidelines for K–12 academic assessments. *Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education*, 21(4), 383–392. doi:10.1093/deafed/enw051

- Hiring Qualified Sign Language Interpreters:
www.nationaldeafcenter.org/hiringsli
- Sign Language Interpreters in the Classroom:
www.nationaldeafcenter.org/classroominterpreters

Additional resources on this subject may be available at www.nationaldeafcenter.org/resources

Reference

¹Learning English. (2011). *A new reason for why the deaf may have trouble reading*. Retrieved from www.tinyurl.com/VOAdeafarticle



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Additional resources can be found at www.nationaldeafcenter.org