

## SECTION 5

### SKILLS IMPORTANT FOR EFFECTIVE SIGN LANGUAGE COMMUNICATION AND SLPI-ASL RATING LEVELS

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#### Introduction

Effective American Sign Language (ASL) communication and Sign Language Proficiency Interview-American Sign Language (SLPI-ASL) rating levels depend on both communicative functioning and linguistic form. Attachment A (pages 3-4) provides a brief overview of factors (functional and linguistic form) important to ASL communication and, therefore, SLPI-ASL ratings.

#### Communicative Functioning

By communicative functioning, in the context of an SLPI, is meant the ability of the candidate/interviewee to have a conversation on topics of interest and importance to the interviewee (and persons with whom the interviewee communicates), and the degree to which the interviewee can approximate a completely “shared and natural conversation. A shared and natural conversation is one containing appropriate elaboration of responses and willing, unconstrained participation. (See Attachment A, #1, page 3.) The more shared and natural the conversation is, the higher the rating will be. Functioning in the SLPI Advanced-Superior rating range is characterized by appropriate, spontaneous elaboration with an unconstrained “ease of conversational” quality; functioning in the SLPI Intermediate rating range is characterized by responses which appear adequately conversational, with responses typically 3-to-5 sentences in length; and functioning in the SLPI Novice-Survival range is characterized by constrained, limited responses of single sign, short phrase, and/or 1-to-3 sentences in length.

#### Linguistic Form

Language form supports communicative functioning. Therefore, the better a person’s language form the more successful her/his conversations may be expected to be. The concept of form involves the actual parts of language which the interviewee uses to engage in conversation. To summarize the information provided in Attachment A (#2-to-#6, page 3), form involves the use of: (1) appropriate sign language vocabulary, with a primary consideration being whether the signs are considered to be a part of sign language vocabulary used by skilled sign language users [including “acceptable” signs in use by a particular language community (educational signs, technical signs, local signs, etc.)]; (2) appropriate handshape, position, orientation, and movement production characteristics of signs (that is, how the signs are formed); (3) fluency (rate and smoothness of signing); (4) grammatical elements important to sign language communication (see below and Attachment B, pages 5-6, for a listing of some important sign language grammatical features); and (5) comprehension or skill at receiving sign language communication. As identified in Attachment B, ASL grammatical features important for effective ASL communicative functioning include (a) space for objects, places, and persons present and not present, (b) directionality and pronoun incorporation with verbs, (c) inflection of sign movements to include adjective and adverb information, (d) number incorporation, (e) the time-line, (f) movement and space for singular versus plural, (g) appropriate non-manual features such as facial expressions and body shifts, (h) classifiers, and (i) ASL sentence and discourse structure (rhetorical question, negation, affirmation, and verbs at end of comments, if...then conditional, etc.).

## Formal/Rhetorical and Communicative Language Norms

A basis for understanding communicative functioning and linguistic form in relation to the SLPI is to understand the distinction between the formal, rhetorical language norm and the more informal, communicative norm. The rhetorical norm represents an idealized form of a language conforming to a set of “proper rules of grammar.” Communicators move toward this rhetorical norm in their language use when situations require more formality or when “critics” may be watching. The rhetorical norm is generally not the “standard” for everyday use of a language. The more informal, communicative norm is found in the everyday communication of skilled language users. Among users of a language there is generally greater variation in their use when communication (not linguistic form) is their goal.

There have been many descriptions of American Sign Language (ASL) and varieties of English-like signing in the United States. Stokoe originally identified a formal and an informal variety of ASL, noting influences of English on these two varieties. Stokoe and other authors have variously described English-like signing as Sign English, Pidgin Sign English, Siglish, and Manually-Coded English. More recently English-like signing has been described as a “contact” variety of ASL (Lucas & Valli, 1989). These various descriptions have recognized the mixtures and borrowing between ASL and English structures. ASL and English have been in contact in the United States for more than 150 years. Due to this contact, as has been documented in the sign language literature, ASL has been influenced by English and English-like signing has developed to include many features of ASL. Haugen (1977) noted that, when there is an intermingling of two languages in contact, the concept of “language norm” is “highly ambiguous and slippery.” He further stated, “We have to recognize that the communicative norm which grows up in bilingual communities is more elastic and less predictable than that of a monolingual community” (p. 98). Given the above, it can be expected that the communicative norm for ASL use in the United States will reflect mixtures and borrowings between the two languages in contact (that is, between ASL and English).

## Superior and Advanced Sign Language Communicators and Sign Skill Level Expectations

Protase Woodford, in discussing the Language/Oral Proficiency Interview (LPI/OPI) (the SLPI is based on the LPI/OPI), stressed that ‘only gods and mothers create native users of a language.’ Because the Superior range of the SLPI rating scale, consistent with the LPI/OPI rating scale, requires near native-like/native-like use of sign language, achievement of an SLPI Advanced rating is an excellent skill level for an adult sign language learner. At the same time, data collected from academic and Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) programs using the SLPI supports the establishment of Advanced as a realistic target skill level for professionals who work with people who are D/deaf. We are continuing data collection from programs using the SLPI in order to provide additional information relative to ASL communication skill standards and ASL communication skills development of persons working with D/deaf people.

## References

- Haugen, E. (1977). Norm and deviation in bilingual communities. In P. A. Hornby, *Bilingualism: Psychological, social, and educational implications* (pp. 91-102). New York: Academic Press.
- Lucas, C., & Valli, C. (1989). Language contact in American deaf community. In C. Lucas (Ed.), *Sociolinguistics in the deaf community* (pp. 11-40). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.

Also, see readings in *SLPI Notebook* Section 8: *Selected Readings for the SLPI*.

## Attachment A

**FUNCTIONAL & LINGUISTIC FORM FACTORS IMPORTANT FOR EFFECTIVE ASL COMMUNICATION AND SLPI RATINGS (See Table 1, next page)**

- 1. Pragmatic/functional use of signing for work and social communication needs** (Includes Conversational Strategies) (all skill levels) - What can interviewee do with her/his ASL skills? Can interviewee have a conversation in ASL? How shared and natural is the conversation? For example, how well interviewee uses ASL to -

- a. Ask and answer questions
- b. Name things
- c. Describe people, places, and things
- d. Tell a story/narrate
- e. Hypothesize (what if/suppose?): Discuss what could be or should be
- f. Support opinion/debate/defend own ideas
- g. General conversational skills (turn-taking, feedback using nonmanual signals, attention getting strategies, appropriate eye contact, ability to ask clarifying questions, etc.)

Sociolinguistics/cultural knowledge (higher skill level ratings require skills in communicating in depth on a variety of topics)

- 2. ASL Vocabulary Knowledge** (all skill levels)

- a. Does interviewee use the correct signs to express her/his meaning? & How broad is interviewee's ASL vocabulary knowledge?
- b. Signs drawn from ASL, including local ASL signs (geographical, school, etc.)
- c. Meaning base for signs (sometimes referred to as "concept based signs/signing"): For example, the following 3 rights signed differently - right answer, right to vote, right turn; also the following haves & runs signed differently - have a bicycle, have been, have not, have to, have (finish) seen, run to school, run an election, run in her stocking

- 3. Production of Signing** (low & high skill levels): Are signs formed correctly (handshapes, positions, orientations, & movements)? Fingerspelling clear?

- 4. Fluency:** Rate and smoothness (low & high skill levels) - Is signing smooth and at a normal rate, with appropriate pausing?

- 5. Grammar** (intermediate-high skill levels): Does interviewees use appropriate features of ASL grammar?

- a. Sentence and Discourse Structure/Sign-Word Order: Sign-word order as appropriate when considering topics, time, verb/actions, actors-agents/subjects-objects, etc.
- b. Use of Important ASL Grammatical Features: Asking Questions, Use of Space, Classifiers, Time Indicators, Facial Expression, etc.

- 6. Comprehension** (all skill levels): Can interviewee understand fluent ASL signing? At what rate/pace?

Table 1. Functional and Linguistic Factors Important for Effective Sign Language Communication and SLPI Ratings.

<u>Factors</u>	<u>Important for SLPI Rating Levels Below</u>
1. Pragmatic/functional use of sign according to situation (Includes Conversational Strategies)	All skill levels
Sociolinguistics/Cultural Knowledge	Most important for high skill levels
2. Vocabulary	All skill levels
3. Production/Accent Pronunciation	Low and high skill levels
4. Fluency	Low and high skill levels
5. Grammar	Grammar improvement often major need to move from one skill level to another in intermediate through high skill levels
6. Comprehension	All skill levels

## Attachment B

(From *SLPI Notebook* Section 6 – pages numbers in parentheses refer to pages in Section 6)

### AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE (ASL) GRAMMAR

1. **Use of space (indexing, eye gaze, & body shifts) for contrasting ideas, comparing things and pronouns**
  - a. Communicating about persons/things that are present/here (pp. 3-4)
  - b. Communicating about persons/things that are not present
    - 1) Pointing to locations in space (Indexing) (pp. 5-6)
    - 2) Looking/glancing at locations in space (Eye-gaze)
    - 3) Listing (Pointing to fingers of non-dominant hand)
    - 4) Classifiers (CL:1, CL:2, CL:3, CL:B) (also, see #11, next page)
2. **Directionality/Using direction of sign verb movement to show subject & object - actor and person/thing acted upon** (pp. 20-21)
3. **Adding to and modifying sign meaning: Movement of signs & facial expressions/non-manual signals:**
  - a. Negating (no/not) - headshake (“not”) and ‘movement and orientation (palm facing) changes’ (pp. 6-7)
  - b. Affirming (yes) - headnod (“it is true”) (p. 8)
  - c. Showing size & intensity – ‘size’ of sign and ‘power,’ speed & quality of movement (pp. 9-10)
  - d. Showing temporal (time) aspect - modification of sign movement (repeated, circular, etc.) for over a long time, from time to time, regularly, frequently, etc.
  - e. Facial expression showing “close in time or space” (time adverbs) (pp. 11-12)
  - f. Movement changes of verb signs - may show attitude and/or how something is done (pp. 13-14)
4. **Repeated action: Shown by repetition of sign verb movement** (GO+++/ATTEND, DRIVE-TO+++ , etc.)
5. **Showing more than one (plural)** (see also #6)
  - a. Sweeping hand horizontally & vertically (p. 24)
  - b. Repeating sign/reduplication (pp. 24-25)
  - c. Adding “cluster-of”/cluster affix (p. 25)
  - d. Pointing to specific locations/indexing
  - e. Adding signs like MANY, FEW, SOME
  - f. Using classifier signs (CL-5, CL-3, CL-4, CL-1 etc.)
6. **Using number handshapes in a sign (Incorporation of Number) (TWO-WEEKS-AGO, THREE-OF-US, AGE-4)** (p. 23)
7. **Showing something belongs to someone (Possessive)** (pp. 3 & 26): B/Palm-Flat Handshape (‘S used when fingerspelling; for example, name of restaurant)

**8. ASL sign word order - for example:**

- a. Rhetorical question - MOVE-TO HERE, WHY? ENJOY OUTDOORS
- b. Conditional Clause (if-then) - (if) RAIN, (then) GAME CANCELED
- c. Topic - Comment - WATCH+++ HOCKEY, ENJOY (ME)
- d. Question marker/sign at end of sentence -
  - 1) NAME, WHAT?
  - 2) WORK, WHERE?
- e. Negation-Affirmation at end of sentence -
  - 1) WINTER, SNOW-a-lot, DON'T LIKE
  - 2) TEACHER ME, YES
  - 3) Modals - CAN, HAVE, WILL
- f. Descriptors/adjectives following nouns - OLD 20, CHILDREN 3, HOUSE RED
- g. Discourse Organization - Time-Place-Agent-Actor-Action-Reaction  
Object-Subject

**9. Classifiers:** ASL has several distinct types of classifiers (size-and-shape-specifiers, semantic classifiers, body classifiers, body-part classifiers, and instrument classifiers). Classifiers take the place of nouns in ASL predicate phrases. For a detailed explanation of the classifier system of ASL, see T. Supalla, (1986), *The classifier system in American Sign Language* [In Carol Padden (Ed.), *Proceedings of the Fourth National Symposium on Sign Language Research and Teaching*, Silver Spring, MD: National Association of the Deaf, pp. 29-35]

- a. CL-1 (person, pencil, pole) & CL-2, CL-3 (people) (p. 29)
- b. CL-Λ (legs of a person) (p. 30)
- c. CL-3 (vehicle-car, bus, train, ship) (p. 30)
- d. CL-G (thinness, picture frame, book binding) (p. 31)
- e. CL-C (thickness, cover of snow) (p. 31)
- f. CL-B (flat object, paper book) (p. 32)
- g. CL-Á (object occupying space, lamp) (p. 32)
- h. CL-F (button, coin, spot, token) (p. 33)
- i. CL-Ĉ (campaign button, silver dollar, large cookie) (p. 33)
- j. CL-Ċ (hockey puck, flat round paper weight)
- k. CL-C (cup, bottle, pipe, post)
- l. CL-1↓:1↓ (legs, manner of gait)
- m. CL-V (small animal, rabbit, bird)
- n. CL-4̣ (people sitting)
- o. CL-5̣ (buildings, piles of something, clumps)

**10. Communicating questions in sign language**

- a. Yes/No Question Expression (p. 17)
- b. Wh-Question Expression (Who, What, Where, How etc.) (p. 18)
- c. Using question with response to make a statement (Rhetorical Question Expression) (p. 19)
- d. Question signs - place in sentence (may be at sentence beginning, end, or both) (p. 20)

**11. Deriving/distinguishing between nouns and verbs (CHAIR & SIT, DOOR & OPEN-DOOR, AIRPLANE & FLY) (p. 27)**

**12. Communicating the Time/Tense (PAST, NOW [PRESENT], FUTURE) (p. 28)**