

**SLPI PAPER #18: PRINCIPLES FOR DEVELOPMENT AND REFINEMENT OF SIGN  
LANGUAGE PROGRAM PHILOSOPHY, POLICY, AND PROCEDURES  
DOCUMENTS**

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April 1998 (1st edition), December 2007 (10th edition)

Introduction

This SLPI PAPER provides principles to consider for development and refinement of sign language program philosophy, policy, and procedures documents. It is important that these principles are considered, applied, modified, and added to within the context of your goals, resources, and other factors specific to your program. These principles are intended to assist you in making decisions for the factors that are discussed in SLPI PAPER #17, *Factors Important to Development and Refinement of Sign Language Program Philosophy, Policy, and Procedures Documents*.

The principles in this PAPER are written from the perspective that sign language communication entry skill levels and standards are being considered for job positions. We are aware that the SLPI is being used for other purposes, including as a screening for entrance into interpreter training programs, as a screening for student teacher and intern applicants, college/university Deaf Education majors, and state teacher licensure. Many of the principles below relate to these latter uses as well. (For example, see PRINCIPLES #3A and #4A.)

Principles

1. POLICY, ENTRY SKILL LEVELS, SKILL LEVEL STANDARDS OR GOALS AND JOB ENTRY DATES:
  - A. For faculty/staff/employees with job entry dates prior to policy approved, a pure professional development model should be used, with faculty/staff/employees encouraged and supported to participate in sign language assessment and skills development opportunities as appropriate.
  - B. For faculty/staff/employees entering job positions with standards or goals after policy approved:
    - 1) If job positions have entry skill levels, these levels should be stated as expected, with a waiver procedures necessary if persons hired do not satisfy expected entry skill levels.
    - 2) Standards/goals should be stated as expected within a specified timeline (generally three or four years).
    - 3) Participation in sign language communications skills development opportunities should be required on an annual basis until standards/goals are achieved.
    - 4) They should take the SLPI on a regular basis until they achieve their standards (see PRINCIPLE #16).

- C. Other options for staff entering job positions before and after policy approved include different skill level standards/goals and different timelines.
- D. If changes in sign language communication skill level expectations are included in a revised policy, faculty/staff/employees in job positions at time of policy change should never have required skill levels increased.

2. JOB ENTRY SKILL LEVELS, STANDARDS OR GOALS AND JOB COMMUNICATION NEEDS:

- A. Types and frequency of job communication situations in which sign language is used should be considered when establishing job entry skill levels and standards.
- B. All established skill levels (job entry, standards/goals, incentive levels, etc.) should -
  - 1) Be of benefit to work and social communication needs and goals within the environment for which the skill levels are established.
  - 2) Consider appropriate use of program assessment and skill development resources.

Note: See PRINCIPLES #6, #9, #10-to #14, and #19.

3. REQUIRED OR EXPECTED AND PREFERRED SKILL LEVELS AT JOB ENTRY:

- A. It is sometimes appropriate to establish both required or expected skill levels at time of job entry and preferred skill levels at time of job entry.

Note: Also, see PRINCIPLE #4A.

- B. The preferred skill level at time of job entry and the skill level standard/goal for a job position should be the same.
- C. Policies guiding SLPI use should include a statement that required/expected sign language skills at time of hire may be waived if there are no qualified applicants who satisfy this requirement/expectation. If this does occur, the timeline for achieving the standard/goal may need to be adjusted and a short-term contract may be offered.

Note: See PRINCIPLE #17B.

- D. Job announcements and hire letters should include statements of job entry required or expected and preferred skill levels and skill level standards/goals.

4. PROVISIONAL AND PERMANENT LICENSURE/CERTIFICATION SKILL LEVEL STANDARDS:

- A. When used for licensure/certification, consideration should be given to establishing both a provisional licensure/certification skill level standard and a permanent licensure/certification skill level standard.
- B. Similar to the concept of a job entry skill level at time of hire, the provisional skill level should be viewed as an entry skill level for persons who are beginning their professional careers, with the permanent skill level standard similar to the preferred skill level; that is, like the preferred skill level, the skill level for permanent licensure/certification should be the standard.

Note: See PRINCIPLE #3.

- C. If a single licensure/certification standard is established, and this is an “entry level standard,” then this standard should be considered a minimal skill level standard, not a preferred skill level standard.

5. SKILL LEVEL EXPECTATIONS AT JOB ENTRY AND STANDARDS: In addition to types and frequency of job communication situations for which sign language is used, job entry skill level expectations influence:

- A. Skill level standards/goals and incentive skill levels that may be reasonably established.
- B. The timelines within which attainment of these skill levels may be reasonably expected.

Note: See PRINCIPLES #6 and #17.

6. STANDARDS/GOALS, SKILL LEVELS AT TIME OF JOB ENTRY, AND TIMELINES:

- A. If the skill level standard/goal is Advanced Plus-Superior Plus Skill Level Range, this level should be required at time of job entry. One exception, based on SLPI results, is interpreters. These preliminary results have shown that interpreters, who are Advanced at the time of job entry, are able to achieve Advanced Plus within two years. While it is true that the SLPI assesses one skill important for persons providing interpreting services, having high-level sign language skills does not mean a person will be able to provide quality interpreting services. For interpreter positions, therefore, interpreter certification, rather than an SLPI skill level, is preferred at time of job entry. If this is not possible, interpreter certification should be required within a specified time from job entry date.

Note: See PRINCIPLES #10, #11, and #12.

- B. If the skill level standard/goal is Advanced, the minimal skill level at time of hire should be Intermediate.
- C. If the skill level standard/goal is Intermediate or below, skill level at time of job entry may be optional, depending on the immediate communication requirements of the job.

Note: See PRINCIPLE #9C.

- D. If a person has no sign language communication skills at time of job entry, the timelines for achieving SLPI rating levels should be consistent with the following: (1) Survival - 2 years, (2) Intermediate – 3 years, (3) Advanced - 4-to-5 years.

Note 1: Programs generally establish a single timeline of three or four years to achieve all standards/goals not required/expected at job entry.

Note 2: Shorter timelines may be appropriate when program resources allow intensive sign language instruction to be provided for new faculty/staff/employees. (See PRINCIPLE #17.)

- 7. **REASONABLE STANDARDS/GOALS AND TIMELINES:** For each job position, the skill level standard/goal and the timeline within which to achieve this standard should be reasonably attainable by a significant percentage of persons in and/or applying for the position; minimum of 80% generally.

Note: See PRINCIPLES #19 and #20.

- 8. **GENERAL STANDARD/GOAL FOR TEACHERS:** If primary job responsibility is teaching students who are Deaf, the recommended skill level standard/goal is Advanced.

- 9. **STANDARDS/GOALS FOR ADMINISTRATORS/SUPERVISORS AT TIME OF JOB ENTRY:**

- A. Administrators/supervisors should be at their skill level standards/goals at time of job entry. This principle is based on the following: (1) administrators/supervisors should serve as model communicators, (2) they should have been successful in developing the skills needed to perform effectively in job positions held prior to becoming an administrator/supervisor, (3) they should be able to communicate directly with faculty/staff/employees who are Deaf, and (4) their job responsibilities generally allow for minimum time to be devoted to development of sign language communication skills.
- B. Professional academic administrators/supervisors generally should have a skill level standard/goal of Advanced at job entry.
- C. General staff administrators/supervisors generally should have a skill level standard/goal of Intermediate at job entry.

10. **ADVANCED PLUS OR ABOVE SKILLS AS A STANDARD/GOAL:** The highest standard/goal you should establish for a job is Advanced Plus. Advanced Plus should be a standard/goal only for persons in job positions such as sign language teachers, interpreters (though interpreter certification is preferred for interpreters), and possibly job positions requiring direct communication within critical one-to-one and small group communication situations (for example, mental health and drug counselors).

NOTE: See PRINCIPLES #6A, #11, and #12.

11. **ADVANCED PLUS AND SUPERIOR RANGE SIGNERS EXCELLENT COMMUNICATORS:** Persons with SLPI ratings of Advanced Plus and persons with SLPI ratings in the Superior Range are all excellent sign language communicators. The primary difference between these two groups is “form”; that is, Superior Range signers consistently show native-like/near native-like form, while Advanced Plus level signers (sometimes) show minor form differences that are consistent with adult learners of sign languages. These differences are similar to a person’s accent in a second/adult learned spoken language, with this accent resulting from the influence of her/his native spoken language on pronunciation/production of the second/adult learned language. The important point is that Advanced Plus and Superior Range signers are excellent communicators and very good to excellent sign language models. Therefore, considering (a) the above, (b) the difficult and time/resource consuming task of distinguishing among Advanced Plus, Superior, and Superior Plus signers, and (c) PRINCIPLE #10 and PRINCIPLE #12, we recommend that, when conducting ratings and establishing standards/goals, the Advanced Plus, Superior, and Superior Plus ratings be combined and reported as a single rating range; that is, *Advanced Plus-Superior Plus Skill Level Range*.
12. **SKILL LEVELS OF SKILLED, EXPERIENCED INTERPRETERS AND SIGN LANGUAGE TEACHERS WHO ARE ADULT LANGUAGE LEARNERS:** Our experience with the SLPI has shown that skilled, experienced interpreters and ASL teachers, who are adult sign language learners, most often achieve ratings of Advanced Plus and sometimes achieve ratings of Superior. This supports that Superior Plus is a very exclusive rating that is generally achieved only by native signers. It also supports that Advanced Plus is a skill level that a select number of adult sign language learners will achieve and that Superior is a skill level that a very select number of adult sign language learners will achieve.
13. **PRIMARY USE OF THE SLPI IS WITH ADULT LANGUAGE LEARNERS:** Like the Language/Oral Proficiency Interview (L/OPI), the assessment tool that the SLPI is based on, primary SLPI use is for assessment of adult language learners, with the highest rating scale level range (Superior/Superior Plus) based on knowledgeable native/native-like language users. This range is what adult language learners look to as their model, but they generally do not achieve, and are not expected to achieve, this highest skill level range. In brief, the Superior Rating Range for both the L/OPI and the SLPI is basically a theoretical construct that provides the “upper” anchor for both the L/OPI and SLPI Rating Scales.

14. INTERMEDIATE OR SURVIVAL PLUS LOWEST SKILL LEVEL  
STANDARD/GOAL RECOMMENDED

- A. The lowest skill level standard/goal we recommend is Intermediate or Survival Plus. The reasons for this are:
- 1) Intermediate is the first SLPI rating level at which a person has the sign language skills needed to participate in a conversation with some confidence.
  - 2) Survival level signers and below require on-going support to maintain their skills, thus placing undue stress both on resources available for developing and maintaining sign language communication skill and on assessment services.
  - 3) Because functional communication is always the first criterion in a rating decision, with analysis of form either supporting or pulling the rating down, it is often the case that interviewees receiving Survival Plus ratings are functioning at the Intermediate level, with their form not supporting an Intermediate rating.
- B. Rather than establish the Survival skill level (or below) as a standard/goal, we recommend that staff participate in professional development activities such as those listed below, with participation in the SLPI procedures optional:
- 1) Workshops on techniques/strategies for communicating effectively with Deaf/Hard-of-Hearing people (for example, use of environmental cues, natural gestures, writing, distance communication, and relay services).
  - 2) Workshops that provide and discuss information and strategies for effectively working with interpreters.
  - 3) Workshops on Deaf culture and community.
  - 4) Successful completion of an approved PROGRAM sign language communication skills development experience (generally two sign language courses) OR achieving an Intermediate SLPI rating.

Note: See PRINCIPLE #2.

15. TEAM CONCEPT: Programs that serve a diverse population of students/clients require a diverse group of faculty/staff/employees working as a team with students/clients. Such programs should consider this diversity and concept of TEAM when establishing standards. For example, for two administrative positions in the same department:
  - A. One position could have a standard/goal and preferred or required entry skill level of Advanced, and the other position a standard/goal of Intermediate with no entry skill level required.
  - B. One position could have a standard/goal and preferred or required entry skill level of Advanced and the other position no skill level standard/goal.
  
16. SKILL LEVEL STANDARDS/GOALS, SKILL LEVELS ACHIEVED, AND EXPECTATIONS FOR (RE) TAKING THE SLPI:
  - A. Faculty/Staff/Employees with skill level standards/goals should take the SLPI within every two years (or “three years” if program resources do not allow two year time frame) until they achieve their standards/goals.
  - B. Faculty/Staff/Employees achieving a rating in the Advanced Plus-Superior Plus Skill Level Range should be exempt from taking the SLPI again on a regular basis.
  - C. If program resources allow, faculty/staff/employees with sign language communication skill level standards/goals of Advanced or below who do not achieve a rating in the Advanced Plus-Superior Plus Skill Level Range should be expected to achieve their standards/goals twice in succession on two SLPIs administered two or three years apart prior to becoming exempt from taking the SLPI on a regular basis.
  - D. Unless there are extenuating circumstances, interviewees should have a minimum of six months between SLPI interviews. The primary reason for this is that moving from one SLPI Rating Scale to the next rating skill level generally requires a minimum of six months, with this time frame increasing as one proceeds up the SLPI Rating Scale rating skill levels.

17. REVIEW PROCEDURES FOR TIMELINE EXTENSIONS FOR ACHIEVING SKILL LEVEL STANDARDS/GOALS:
- A. If dismissal from job is a possibility for staff members/employees not achieving their skill level standards/goals, policy and procedures guiding use of these standards/goals should include a review procedures that considers possible extension of the timelines for achieving standards/goals.
- B. Timeline-Extension Guidelines: If there are no qualified applicants having the required or expected entry skill level at time of job entry, guidelines for considering timeline extensions are as follows:
- 1) If entry skill level and standard/goal are both Advanced Plus—
    - a. If applicant has Advanced skills at hire, s/he has two years to achieve Advanced Plus or Above skills.
    - b. If applicant has Intermediate range skills at hire, s/he has three years to achieve Advanced Plus or Above skills.
    - c. No applicant with below Intermediate range skills should be considered for hire.
  - 2) If entry skill level and standard/goal are both Advanced—
    - a. If applicant has Intermediate range skills at hire, s/he has two years to achieve Advanced or Above skills.
    - b. If applicant has Survival range skills at hire, s/he has three years to achieve Advanced or Above skills.
    - c. If applicant has Below Survival range skills at hire, s/he has four years to achieve Advanced or Above skills.
  - 3) If entry skill level is Intermediate and standard/goal skill level is Advanced—
    - a. If applicant has Survival range skills at hire, s/he has three years to achieve Advanced or Above skills.
    - b. If applicant has below Survival range skills at hire, s/he has four years to achieve Advanced or Above skills.
  - 4) If entry skill level and standard/goal are both Intermediate—
    - a. If applicant has Survival range skills at hire, s/he has two years to achieve Intermediate or Above skills.
    - b. If applicant has below Survival range skills, s/he has three years to achieve Intermediate or Above skills.

Note: As stated earlier, programs generally establish a single timeline of three or four years to achieve all standards/goals not required/expected at job entry. (See PRINCIPLE #6.)



18. REASONABLE ACCOMMODATIONS:

Policies and procedures should also include statements that address principles and procedures for reasonable accommodation requests.

19. ETHICAL VALIDITY: It is important in the application of all assessment tools to job skill level standards/goals that issues of ethical validity are taken into consideration. In brief, ethical validity refers to how assessment tools are applied within social contexts. Is the application fair? What “good” is achieved by the application of the assessment tool? What potential harm can be done to persons affected by the application? Do persons who can perform a particular job/task achieve the standard/goal?

20. IMPORTANCE OF ANNUAL REPORTS FOR MONITORING AND ADJUSTING, IF APPROPRIATE, ENTRY SKILL LEVELS and STANDARDS/GOALS: For each program using the SLPI, SLPI results need to be monitored in order to help determine if results support or do not support program entry skill levels and standards/goals. Programs vary in their ability and resources: (a) to provide follow-up meetings for people taking the SLPI, (b) to provide SLPI interviewing-rating services within specified time frames, (c) to hire people who already possess sign language communication skills (especially at job skill level standards), and (d) to provide sign language communication skills development opportunities. An annual sign language program report, therefore, that includes SLPI results, should be used to inform policy decisions for establishing, maintaining, and/or changing entry skill levels and standards/goals, and for making other policy and programmatic changes. One reason for an annual report is to check group results in order to help determine if standards/goals and timelines are appropriate. For example, if a job position standard/goal is Advanced and results show that 90-to-95% of staff in this job position achieve this standard/goal within the expected timeline, this would support maintaining Advanced as the standard/goal. On the other hand, if only 30% achieve the standard/goal for a given position within the expected timeline, the fairness of the standard/goal and timeline may be questioned and programmatic changes should be considered in order to address this. These changes may include: (a) extending the timeline, (b) improving and expanding sign language communication skill development opportunities available to staff, (c) raising skill level expectations at time of job entry, and (d) changing the standard/goal.

Note 1: In addition to the above possible changes, it may be appropriate to provide in-service training for SLPI Team Members in order to help ensure they are interpreting and applying the SLPI Rating Scale in a consistent manner. The L/OPI literature recommends that raters receive re-calibration training every two to three years. (As stated in PRINCIPLE #13, the SLPI is based on the L/OPI.)

Note 2: See PRINCIPLE #7.

## Conclusion

The establishment of sign language communication job entry skill levels and standard/goals is a major step in improving communication and services in academic, vocational, and other professional environments. At the same time it is critical to recognize that establishment of job entry skill levels, standards/goals, and timelines for achieving standards/goals, requires on-going efforts to ensure fairness. This responsibility can only be satisfied through on-going monitoring of SLPI results and openness to making changes, as appropriate, to entry skill levels, standards/goals, timelines for achieving standards/goals, and other policy and programmatic changes in order to help ensure we are acting in a fair and ethical manner. An annual staff/employee sign language program report is an important part of this monitoring procedure. For sample annual sign language program reports see documents in the Implementing and Monitoring SLPI Use section of the following website: [www.rit.edu/ntid/slpi](http://www.rit.edu/ntid/slpi).