READY FOR THE CLASSROOM? ASSESSING PRE-SERVICE INTERPRETERS' AND TEACHERS' RECEPTIVE AND EXPRESSIVE AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE SKILLS

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ABSTRACT

The present study investigated the receptive and expressive sign language skills of pre-service interpreter and teacher candidates using an informal assessment within a narrative context. Candidates' ratings of two child signers and themselves were compared overall and across 12 sign language indicators to ratings of two university program professors. While some variation existed across ratings for individual indicators, in general candidates were aware of and able to accurately rate children's and their own abilities.

INTRODUCTION

Many children who are deaf use sign language for communication and instruction (Gallaudet Research Institute 2011). Students frequently receive a large share of their access to sign language within the school setting, as most parents with deaf children are hearing and few learn sign language (Mitchell and Karchmer 2004). In the United States, most children who are deaf/hard of hearing attend their local neighborhood schools, frequently as one of very few deaf students in their general education classes (U.S. Department of Education 2013). They are provided with educational interpreters and teachers of the deaf (TODs) as needed under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (2004). These students depend upon their interpreters and teachers for language learning. For optimal language development and academic progress, it is critical that educators are knowledgeable of students' language skills, both receptive and expressive, and that they communicate and instruct students effectively using students' respective communication modes/languages (Marschark et al., 2009). However, few studies exist that specifically address what proficiency levels are necessary for effective communication and instruction. In our review of literature related to sign language training and proficiency levels we found 10 articles related to interpreters; few interpreters met minimal proficiency levels on the Educational Interpreter Performance Assessment (EIPA; Schick, Williams, and Bolster 1999; Yarger 2001) and one sample of candidates rated themselves novice to intermediate, which aligned with instructor ratings (Stauffer 2011). We found three studies related to teacher training with no results for teachers' proficiency.

In the United States, required tests include formal interview situations with a deaf adult communication partner (American Sign Language Proficiency Interview (ASLPI), Sign Language Proficiency Interview (SLPI)) or submission of an actual interpreting work sample (Educational Interpreter Performance Assessment). Some university educator preparation programs and some states (i.e., school systems) require interpreters and teachers to meet specific sign language proficiency levels. Based on 16 responses from a recent survey sent to members of the American College Educators-Deaf/Hard of Hearing (ACE-D/HH; August, 2014) who

represented 62 teacher and 75 interpreter preparation programs in the U.S., two interpreting preparation programs and eight teacher preparation programs require candidates to pass an external sign language assessment with minimum ratings of 'intermediate' on the SLPI and level '3' for the ASLPI. A score of 3.5 or higher is required by many interpreter training programs on the EIPA (Schick, Williams, and Bolster 1999). In many cases, educators are not required to meet any sign language proficiency levels. Based on 24 responses from State Department of Education Consultant/Contracts for Students who are DHH, 16 states currently do not require any specific level of ASL proficiency for teachers of the deaf. Eight state schools (i.e., residential or day schools for the deaf) have a required teacher proficiency level of '3' on the ASLPI for 'acceptable' or an 'intermediate' on the SLPI. However, interpreters and teachers are not able to utilize formal assessment results efficiently to tailor their instruction because results are not available until weeks after test administration. Informal instructional assessments of children's and educators' proficiency that provide expedient feedback to make instructional changes are not readily available. To provide effective and accurate instruction, educators of students who use sign language must be able to proficiently render it and correctly assess their students' skills to develop and implement individualized data-based instruction.

Narrative tasks are one avenue for informal and efficient evaluation of sign language skills. Narrative retell involves telling a true or fictional story with temporal sequence and has been used with signing deaf children (Beal-Alvarez and Easterbrooks 2013), deaf adults (Aarons and Morgan 2003; Beal-Alvarez and Easterbrooks 2013), and interpreters (van Dijk, Boers, Christoffels, and Hermans 2011) to assess story sign language skills. The present study investigated university interpreter and teacher candidates' abilities to analyze both children's and their own signed narratives across 12 skills when rendering a picture storybook in sign language using an adapted version of the Signed Reading Fluency Rubric for Deaf Children (SRFR, Easterbrooks and Huston 2008).

METHODS

Ten university students in the Interpreting major (n = 7), Deaf Education major (n = 2), and Deaf Studies minor programs (n = 1) at a university in the southeast United States participated in the present study. Candidates ranged from 18-29 years in age. Seven were female, one was deaf, and seven candidates had fewer than three years of sign language experience. Candidates performed two tasks: 1) they rendered a picture book in ASL and self-assessed their expressive ASL skills; and 2) they assessed two 9-year-old students' video-recorded picture book retells. We analyzed candidates' SRFR ratings across retells compared to university professors' ratings and by candidates' program affiliation to determine if all candidates were sufficiently prepared to proficiently render and analyze ASL skills at the end of their American Sign Language IV course. Inter-observer agreement was 81% and 100% for exact or adjacent agreement (i.e., agreement within one level) between authors for Asa and Paz, respectively, and 93% across candidates.

RESULTS

Across candidates and authors, Asa was rated as an emerging-beginning signer (see Table 1).

Table 1. Candidates' ratings on the Signed Reading Fluency Rubric for Asa.

Indicator	Candidate 1[a]	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Cand. Mean	A1[b]	A2[c]	Auth Mean
Speed	2	2	2	-	1	1	4	1	2	3	**1.9**	3	1	**2**
Facial Expression	2	1	3	2	0	2	1	2	2	1	**1.7**	2	2	**2**
Body Movement	1	1	0	1	0	1	2	2	2	2	**1.1**	1	2	**1.5**
Sign Space	2	2	4	0	2	2	3	1	2	2	**2.0**	3	1	**2**
Sign Movement	2	2	2	3	1	2	3	1	3	3	**2.1**	2	2	**2**
Use of Space	2	2	1	0	1	2	3	1	2	3	**1.6**	1	2	**1.5**
Role Taking	0	1	2	0	0	0	2	0	1	2	**0.7**	1	2	**1.5**
Eye Gaze	2	2	4	1	0	0	3	1	1	2	**1.6**	2	1	**1.5**
Directionality	1	1	4	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	**1.9**	3	3	**3**
Use of Classifiers	3	3	4	2	2	2	4	3	3	4	**2.9**	3	3	**3**
Pronominalization	2	2	2	0	0	0	3	0	2	1	**1.2**	3	2	**2.5**
Mean	**1.7**	**1.8**	**2.5**	**1.4**	**1.1**	**1.8**	**3.2**	**1.8**	**2.6**	**3.0**	**1.8**	2.2	1.9	**2.0**

[a] 0=not observed; 1=Emerging; 2=Beginning; 3=Developing; 4=Mature/Fluent. [b] A1=First author; [c]A2=Second author.

More variation occurred across indicators for Asa, with teacher candidates rating him higher overall (M = 2.8, SD = 0.7) than interpreter candidates (M = 1.7, SD = 0.6), and 0.8-1.2 points higher across indicators. Candidates' scores were noticeably lower than authors' scores for role taking, directionality, and pronominalization. Candidates' and authors' mean scores did not correlate (*r* = .03). Paz was rated as a developing-mature signer, with less variation in ratings across candidates and authors and similar ratings by both teacher (M = 2.4, SD = 0.3) and interpreter (M = 3.5, SD = 0.6) candidates (see Table 2).

Table 2. Candidates' ratings on the Signed Reading Fluency Rubric for Paz.

Indicator	Candidate 1[a]	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Cand. Mean	A1[b]	A2[c]	Auth Mean
Speed	3	3	3	4	4	3	4	3	4	4	**3.4**	4	3	**3.5**
Facial Expression	4	4	4	4	3	4	4	4	4	4	**3.9**	4	3	**3.5**
Body Movement	3	4	2	4	3	4	4	3	3	4	**3.3**	4	3	**3.5**
Sign Space	4	3	3	4	3	3	3	3	4	4	**3.3**	4	3	**3.5**

Sign Movement	3	4	4	4	3	3	4	3	4	4	**3.6**	4	3	**3.5**
Fingerspelling	4	3	4	4	4	3	3	4	3	3	**3.6**	4	3	**3.5**
Use of Space	3	4	2	4	4	3	3	3	4	3	**3.3**	4	3	**3.5**
Role Taking	4	4	3	4	3	3	4	3	4	3	**3.6**	4	3	**3.5**
Eye Gaze	4	4	3	4	4	3	3	2	3	3	**3.3**	4	4	**4**
Directionality	3	4	2	4	3	3	3	3	4	4	**3.2**	4	3	**3.5**
Use of Classifiers	4	4	3	4	3	3	4	4	4	4	**3.7**	4	3	**3.5**
Pronominalization	3	4	2	4	2	0	3	4	3	1	**2.6**	3	2	**2.5**
Mean	**3.5**	**3.8**	**2.9**	**4.0**	**3.3**	**2.9**	**3.5**	**3.3**	**3.7**	**3.4**	**3.4**	3.9	3.0	**3.5**

[a] 1=Emerging; 2=Beginning; 3=Developing; 4=Mature/Fluent. [b] A1=First author; [c] A2=Second author.

Candidates' and authors' mean scores differed only for eye gaze and strongly correlated (r = .74). Overall means for interpreters' self-evaluations (M = 2.9, SD = 0.2) were lower than teachers' (M = 3.2, SD = 0.3) with ranges of 2.9-3.4 across indicators (see Table 3).

Table 3. Candidates' self-assessment ratings on Signed Reading Fluency Rubric.

	Candidate										
Indicator	1[a]	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Mean
Speed	1	3	4	3	3	3	2	4	3	3	**2.9**
Facial Expression	2	3	4	4	3	4	3	4	4	3	**3.4**
Body Movement	2	3	3	3	3	3	3	4	4	3	**3.1**
Sign Space	2	3	3	3	3	3	3	4	3	2	**2.9**
Sign Movement	2	3	4	4	3	3	2	4	3	3	**3.1**
Fingerspelling	2	4	3	3	3	4	3	4	4	3	**3.3**
Use of Space	1	4	2	4	2	3	3	4	4	2	**2.9**
Role Taking	1	4	3	3	2	4	3	4	3	3	**3.0**
Eye Gaze	1	4	4	4	3	3	3	3	4	3	**3.2**
Directionality	1	3	3	4	3	3	3	3	3	3	**2.9**
Use of Classifiers	2	4	3	4	2	4	3	4	4	3	**3.3**
Pronominalization	2	3	2	4	3	4	1	4	3	3	**2.9**

Mean	**1.6**	**3.4**	**3.2**	**3.6**	**2.8**	**3.4**	**2.7**	**3.8**	**3.5**	**2.8**
A1[b] Mean	**1.5**	**2.8**	**3.0**	**3.4**	**2.7**	**3.0**	**3.4**	**4.0**	**3.7**	**2.8**
A2 [c] Mean	**1.7**	**3.5**	**3.1**	**2.9**	**3.4**	**3.5**	**3.3**	**3.4**	**3.3**	**3.3**

[a] 0=not observed; 1=Emerging; 2=Beginning; 3=Developing; 4=Mature/Fluent. [b] A1=First author; [c]A2=Second author; [d] Candidate's final grade for ASL III; she did not complete ASL IV.

Author 1 rated six candidates lower than their self-ratings, three candidates higher, and one the same. Author 2 rated four candidates lower and six candidates higher than their self-ratings. Authors' and candidates' scores strongly correlated (r = .70) and agreement was within one proficiency level over 90% of the time.

CONCLUSION

While scores across indicators varied, candidates' and authors' overall scores were similar for children and candidates' self-ratings, suggesting that pre-service candidates can accurately assess the skills of children and themselves using the SRFR, similar to previous results (Easterbrooks and Huston 2008). It appears that a less fluent signer (i.e., Asa) was more difficult for candidates to accurately assess than a more fluent signer (i.e., Paz), suggesting a need for pre-service candidates to have more experience with less fluent signers within their preparation programs. It also seems that interpreter candidates may have a linguistic focus, while teacher candidates appeared to have a communicative focus in their ratings of children. Future investigations should include the addition of narrative prompts to analyze candidates' awareness of their receptive and expressive errors, their renditions along an English to ASL spectrum to match the communication styles of their students, and the collection of longitudinal data to direct professional development, similar to previous findings (Schick, Williams, and Bolster 1999; Yarger 2001).

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