

## **THE SIGN LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY INTERVIEW: DESCRIPTION AND USE WITH SIGN LANGUAGE OF THE NETHERLANDS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The Sign Language Proficiency Interview (SLPI) is a tool for assessing functional sign language skill. Based on the Language Aptitude Test, it uses a recorded 20 minute conversation between a skilled interviewer and the candidate. The interview uses an ad hoc series of probing and challenging questions to elicit the candidate's best use of the targeted sign language, in topics relating to the candidate's work, family/background, and leisure activities. This video language sample is then analyzed to determine the candidate's rating on the SLPI Rating Scale. The rating process documents vocabulary, grammar and comprehension, and follows a protocol that includes specific examples from the interview. The SLPI is used widely in the US and Canada with American Sign Language, and one of the presenters has adapted it for use with South African Sign Language.

The presenters have recently adapted the SLPI for use with Sign Language of the Netherlands (NGT). While the interview process is the same regardless of the sign language, two aspects of the adaptation for NGT required attention: 1) modifying the grammar analysis to match NGT grammar; and 2) modifying the Rating Scale to align with that of the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR).

This ICED presentation will include: 1) a description of SLPI goals, processes and implementation; 2) modifications to align with the CEFR; and 3) modifications for NGT grammar.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The Sign Language Proficiency Interview (SLPI) (<http://www.rit.edu/ntid/slpi>) is a tool for assessing a person's functional communication skills in a natural sign language. Developed at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID) in Rochester, New York (USA), it is in use at approximately 30 schools, colleges, and social service sites in the US and Canada as the SLPI:American Sign Language (SLPI:ASL). It has been adapted for South African Sign Language as the SLPI:SASL, and is used for staff SASL skill assessment at the National Institute for the Deaf in Worcester, South Africa. It has also been adapted for use at Utrecht University of Applied Sciences and is used there to assess the Sign Language of the Netherlands (Nederlandse Gebarentaal, or NGT) skills of interpreting and teacher-students as the NGT Functional Assessment (NFA). A change in name was required because the rating scale was adjusted to align with the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for language assessment, and because of variations in the rating process that are not consistent with the SLPI.

## SLPI GOAL

The goal of the SLPI is to assess the functional sign language skill of a person (referred to as a *candidate*): i.e., the candidate's ability to communicate in the target sign language. The SLPI is not concerned with the candidate's knowledge *about* vocabulary or grammar or any metalinguistic knowledge. Rather, the candidate is rated on the ability to express him or herself in sign language concerning topics relevant to his or her life, and the ability to understand sign language as presented by an interlocutor with native/near native sign skills.

## SLPI PROCESS

There are two parts to the SLPI process: the interview and the rating.

### The Interview

The SLPI uses a 20 minute sample of the candidate's use of the target language, which is obtained via an interview: a recorded conversation with an interviewer. The goal of the interview is to elicit the candidate's best sign language skills – the depth and breadth of the candidate's vocabulary, grammar and comprehension.

To do this, the interviewer's questions cover three areas about which the candidate is knowledgeable: work or course of study; family and background; and leisure activities and hobbies. This ensures that any deficiencies revealed in the candidate's use of the target language are not due to a lack of familiarity with the subject matter.

The interviewer carefully guides the conversation, although to the candidate it appears to be a fairly normal chat. The interviewer asks several series of questions. Beginning each series are one or two *opening* questions that set the stage for *challenging*, or *probing* questions. Answers to the opening questions reveal sub-topics that can be probed with further questions designed to require increasingly sophisticated language use.

Examples of opening questions are:

- Where do you work?
- Do you like your job?
- What does your sister do?
- What do you like to do when you have free time?

Examples of probing questions are:

- Why is it important to solve that problem?
- Describe the process for getting an article published.
- How do you set up the saw for that kind of cut?

Here is one example of a string of questions that require increasingly sophisticated language use. Note that the first (opening) question allows the candidate to pick the sub-topic which the interviewer immediately exploits.

- What's one part of your job that you especially like? (*A: Helping students prepare for math tests.*)
- How do you do that? (*A: I go over the course material they've been studying for the past several weeks.*)
- Can you describe that process for me? (*A: Well, first I...and then I...and then...*)
- How do you deal with situations when students can't understand what you're explaining? (*A: Break the material down into simpler chunks...emphasize the basic mathematical principles.*)
- Give me an example of one mathematical principle that causes a problem, and explain the process you use to describe it.
- Etc.

Unless the candidate is highly skilled – native or near-native skills – at some point his or her skills will be inadequate to answer the questions posed, and he or she will begin to feel frustration. At that point, the interviewer backs out of that line of questioning and opens a new series of questions, starting again with an opening question.

This process repeats for 20 minutes, devoting approximately seven minutes to each of the three topic areas. This reveals the candidate's vocabulary level, ability to use sign language grammar, and comprehension skill.

### The Rating

There are two critical aspects of language use addressed in the SLPI rating process: *function* and *form*. Function is the highest level of consistent *successful* communication of the person taking the SLPI; i.e., *what* the candidate can express. Form is the candidate's vocabulary knowledge, production, fluency, grammar and comprehension; i.e., *how* the candidate expresses himself or herself.

As the SLPI is a measure of functional communication skill, the rating process first establishes the candidate's highest functional level. The process then analyzes the form to see if it supports the initial decision regarding function.

There are several configurations for the rating process, but they all share these characteristics: a) the video sample is scored by two to three raters using the SLPI Rating Scale; b) all final rating decisions must be unanimous; and c) initial disagreements are resolved by a second viewing and/or discussion.

The NTID rating process employs three raters working together with the following process.

1. Watch approximately five minutes of the interview and establish an initial function rating (independent work with no sharing or discussion).
2. Rewind interview video and watch from start to finish. Document on Rater Worksheet examples of candidate's vocabulary knowledge, semantic and production errors, grammar use, and comprehension. These together constitute the candidate's form (independent work with no sharing or discussion).
3. Each rater independently determines if the candidate's form supports the initial function rating (independent work with no sharing or discussion).  
If yes, that becomes the individual rater's final rating for that candidate.  
If no, the rating may be lowered by one or, rarely, two points.
4. A fourth person collects the three rater worksheets. If the three ratings are within one level of each other, the raters proceed to the discussion protocol to resolve differences.
5. If the three ratings are not within one level of each other, the raters do a second viewing of part of the interview. There is no discussion and they do not write; they use a holistic approach to re-assess their individual final ratings.
6. Following the second viewing, raters write a second individual final rating. It may be lower, higher or the same as their first rating decision.
7. Regardless of whether the three individual ratings are now within one level of each other, the raters proceed to the discussion protocol to arrive at a final team rating.

The discussion protocol documents the three raters' aggregate information about the language sample on a single form. This usually results in a unanimous final team rating. If it does not, the interview is given to a second team. If that team's rating is the same as the first, that becomes the official rating and the process concludes. If the second team's rating is different from the first rating, the interview is given to a third rating team. If that team's rating matches either of the first two, that becomes the official rating and the process concludes. If the third team provides yet a third, different final team rating, the interview is declared invalid. In actual practice, the SLPI Coordinator will usually come to the conclusion that the interview is not valid before this process extends to this described end, and a re-interview is scheduled.

## **ADAPTION OF THE SLPI FOR NGT: THE NFA**

In 2010 the Interpreter and Teacher training programmer at Utrecht University of Applied Sciences changed their sign language curriculum. The program had used a grammar-based curriculum from the start in 1997, but now made a shift to a communication oriented approach. At the same time the curriculum was aligned to the Common European Framework of Languages (CEFR). These two changes required another type of language test. The tests formerly used to assess sign language skills did not adequately measure the ability to *communicate*, but rather focused on correct

use of grammar. The SLPI, being a test that focuses on the functional skills of a student, appeared to be the perfect test to reach the programme's goals. In order to use the test for the Dutch situation, two major adaptations had to be made: the test had to be aligned with the CEFR levels, and the rater forms had to be adapted for the grammar of NGT. Though many ASL grammatical features are also used in NGT, others are either not used or are less prominent. In order to make these adaptations, a team of deaf and skilled hearing signers with metalinguistic knowledge of NGT went over all the rubrics stated on the rating form, and discussed whether the individual rubrics could be maintained or should be adapted. One of the adaptations was for example the rubric 'sign word order', as ASL and NGT use different word orders.

A initial period of consultation and familiarization led to the decision to adapt the materials. This was followed by an intensive training in 2011. Ten skilled signers, deaf and hearing, were trained in conducting interviews and rating them. This week was followed by a period of guided practice with the interview and rating processes. A second training followed in 2012, also followed by guided practice. In 2013 the NFA was introduced to the students of the programme. In 2014 three new team members were trained and added to the team.

## **SLPI AND NFA: DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES**

Both the SLPI and the NFA use the same interview procedure. Both interviews cover the same three topic areas and last twenty minutes. The duration of the interview is something that cannot be changed, as this is the amount of time needed to fully explore the candidate's language ability. The interview technique is not dependent on language or culture, although some areas of questions might be less appropriate in one culture than in the other.

The SLPI and the NFA differ regarding the rating process. The NFA rating process employs two raters working together with the following process.

1. Watch approximately five minutes of the interview and establish an initial function rating (independent work with no sharing or discussion).
2. Rewind interview video and watch from start to finish. Document on Rater Worksheet examples of candidate's vocabulary knowledge, semantic and production errors, grammar use, and discourse strategies. These together constitute the candidate's form (independent work with no sharing or discussion).
3. Each rater independently determines if the candidate's form supports the initial function rating (independent work with no sharing or discussion).  
If yes, that becomes the individual rater's final rating for that candidate.  
If no, the rating may be lowered by one or, rarely, two points.
4. The two raters share their individual ratings.

5. If the two ratings are equal, this rating is the final rating. If the two ratings differ, the two raters have a discussion and try to establish a final rating. If the discussion does not lead to an agreement, a third rater is appointed to rate, following steps 1-3.
6. If the third rater agrees with one of the two raters, this rating is the final rating. If the rating of the third rater differs from both ratings, the interview is declared invalid.

Note that step 1-3 of both rating procedures are equal. Both the SLPI as the NFA use the same indicators to establish the initial rating (function) and the final rating (form), though some changes in the rating form were made regarding the specific examples of the grammar.

The most prominent difference is the levels both assessments refer to. The SLPI distinguishes eleven levels, whereas the NFA only distinguishes seven.

Another difference is that the SLPI can be used to assess both second language learners and native signers. The NFA can be used to assess both groups, *but* the levels used to express the ability of the candidate are aligned with the CEFR, which is a framework used for second language learners. (See Figure 1)

*Figure 1: SLPI-levels corresponding to NFA-levels*

<b>SLPI: Levels of the SLPI Rating Scale</b>	<b>NFA: Levels Aligned With CEFR</b>
Superior plus	C2
Superior	C1
Advanced plus	
Advanced	B2
Intermediate plus	
Intermediate	B1
Survival plus	
Survival	A2
Novice plus	
Novice	A1
No functional skills	No functional skills

## **ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF BOTH ASSESSMENTS**

Both tests use an interview, covering topics that the candidate is familiar with. This gives the candidate the opportunity to use real-life language, without being distracted by written texts or cartoons that are not relevant to their communication situations. Another advantage of the interview is that the interviewer extracts the candidate's *best language*. This helps compensate for the fact that the actual content of various candidates' cannot be compared due to the individualized nature of the interview.

Both tests have extensive rating procedures, which are costly in terms of time and sometimes money. Both tests require unanimous decisions. As with many other language tests, evaluators must be trained. Periodic re-training ensures that the raters' work maintains its initial calibration and reliability.

The NFA only distinguishes seven levels. B2 is the level required of the students for completion of the training program. The jump from B1 to B2 represents a significant improvement in NGT skill, and students often need to be re-evaluated several times before attaining B2. This can result in frustration because although they may be making good progress during this period, the NFA does not pick up these smaller increments of language skill improvement.