

Satisfaction and Negative Experiences of Deaf Leaders with Interpreters

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THIS STUDY WAS BASED ON American deaf leaders' cumulative response to a national attitude survey in 2000–2001. In addition, it was excerpted from Dr. Larry Forestal's dissertation entitled, "A Study of Deaf Leaders' Attitudes towards Sign Language Interpreters and Interpreting."

Age, education, and frequency of use of interpreters were personal characteristics of deaf leaders in relation to attitudes whereas satisfaction and negative experiences with interpreters were experiential characteristics based on their direct relation to the interpreting interaction.

The word "leader" refers to officers and board members of the National Association of the Deaf (NAD) and State Associations of the Deaf at some point between 1960 and 1999. A total of 502 leaders responded to the attitude survey in 2000. Only 394 leaders (217 male and 177 female) were qualified for this attitude study on the basis that they answered all attitude-scale questions in the third part of the survey.

The mean age of the leaders was 53.4. Younger leaders used interpreters more regularly than older leaders. Those leaders (265) with a college degree were inclined to use interpreters more regularly than those leaders (129) without a degree. Those leaders with a Master's degree and those leaders who never attended college were statistically different. Thus, education was related to attitudes.

55% of the leaders confirmed having negative experiences with interpreters. Those leaders with negative experiences used interpreters more frequently than those leaders without negative experiences. Nearly 84% were satisfied with interpreters they had used within the past two years.

Speaking of the difference between older and younger leaders, older leaders were inclined to show gratitude and appreciation for interpreters, whereas younger leaders possessed a strong tendency to criticize or complain about interpreters. Why? Was interpreting a new profession? Was there a lack of knowledge about the interpreter's role? Was mainstream education a factor? Was a lack of sense of history about sign language interpreting another reason?

In this study gender, age, frequency of use of interpreters, education, negative experiences, and satisfaction with interpreters were attitude variables. In relation to the significance of each attitude variable, gender was not significant whereas all the other variables were significant. Age and frequency of use of interpreters accounted for 4.2% and 2.2% respectively of the variance in attitude scores.

Negative experiences and satisfaction with interpreters accounted for 6.5% and 9.1% respectively of the variance in attitude scores. On the whole, satisfaction and negative experiences together accounted for 15.6%; their combined influence on attitudes was approximately two and half times greater than age and frequency of use of interpreters, both of which accounted for 6.4% of the variance in attitude scores.

There are numerous examples of deaf leaders' statements about their negative experiences:

1. "An interpreter took over to say things which I should take care of."
2. "Once certified, interpreters think themselves as God's gifts to the deaf."
3. Paternalistic attitudes toward deaf consumers of interpreter services
4. "Interpreters go over boundaries."
5. No facial expression
6. Poor receptive skills
7. Bad personal habits and poor hygiene
8. Superior behavior, looking down on non-certified interpreters
9. CODAs have ego-control problems.
10. Exaggerated ASL and facial expression
11. Gossip
12. Interpreter's own opinion thrown in
13. SEE, not ASL
14. Too much make-up and jewelry
15. Violations of confidentiality and the Interpreter Code of Ethics
16. Not qualified to interpret in the court setting
17. "I saw an interpreter's misdeeds in the operating room but the supervisor defended him or her."

18. "An interpreter treated me as if I were an illiterate person."
19. Interpreters did not use updated technical sign vocabulary.
20. It took three weeks to get an interpreter.

A question of why interpreter competency is very important came up often in the study. In the process of analyzing survey data, interpreter competency was the only attitude domain with consistency. 68% of the leaders believed that CODAs (children of deaf adults) make better or more skilled interpreters than non-CODAs. 181 leaders (46%) cited poor sign-to-voice interpreting as the first reason for their negative experiences. There is no doubt that interpreter competency is the key to the interpreter's successful profession.

In the area of interpreter education or training, both CODAs and non-CODAs should be trained and certified. The Section 504 regulations under the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and Congressional Amendments mandate the continued development of competent interpreters. Advocates of the interpreting profession should be committed to pursuing additional and new funds for interpreter education.

How can interpreting improve for the benefit of deaf communities? First, interpreter education with an emphasis on the development of structured sign-to-voice interpreting skills should be a high priority at all levels of government and in public and private sectors. Second, mentor interpreters should be paired with student interpreters in the field of interpreter education. Third, the educational exposure of student interpreters to deaf adults should be maximized in the local and regional deaf communities.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Larry Forestal grew up in the summer resort of Asbury Park, New Jersey, with deaf parents and two deaf sisters. He attended Gallaudet University and obtained his doctorate at New York University. At the University of Utah, Larry is presently an assistant professor of Teaching American Sign Language Emphasis toward a Bachelor's degree and state licensure. During his 1984-86 presidency, the National Association of the Deaf recognized American Sign Language as a legitimate language in a position paper: *American Sign Language and English, and Communication and Language Rights of Deaf People*. He is a Board member of the Utah Association for the Deaf. He and his wife, Geraldine Francini, live in Salt Lake City and Surprise, Arizona.