THE GEORGIA AND NEW YORK STATE PROGRAMS FOR ASSESSING AND DEVELOPING SIGN COMMUNICATION SKILLS OF REHABILITATION PERSONNEL

Frank Caccamise and William Newell
National Technical Institute for the Deaf
Rochester Institute of Technology
Rochester, NY 14623

Dennis Fennell
Georgia Division of Rehabilitation Services
Atlanta, GA 30309

and

Nancy Carr
New York State Office of Vocational Rehabilitation
Albany, NY 12234

Abstract

Effective communication between vocational rehabilitation (VR) personnel and their clients is critical to the rehabilitation process. This paper stresses (a) the importance of VR personnel and clients sharing the opportunity and challenge for establishing effective communication, and (b) the importance of an integrated approach to sign communication skills assessment and development/learning opportunities for VR personnel. The Georgia and New York State VR programs for assessing and developing the sign communication skills of VR personnel are described, and an overview of the sign communication assessment instrument used by both programs, the Sign Communication Proficiency Interview (SCPI), is provided.

"Educational programs traditionally have placed emphasis on developing and improving students' communication skills. Recent developments have lead to an increased awareness that faculty/staff, as well as students, share in the need to develop and improve their communication skills. These developments include research on the communicative strengths of signing, the use of signing as an instructional tool, and hard-of-hearing students in American Sign Language (ASL) and/or Pidgin Sign English (PSE)/natural sign English." (Caccamise & Newell, 1987, p. 168).

This statement offers both an opportunity and a challenge to those of us who work with deaf and hard-of-hearing students and clients in academic and rehabilitation settings; that is, the opportunity to use the sign communication skills of our students/clients to assist in achieving academic and vocational goals, and the challenge to develop and effectively use our potential for sign communication skills. This, basically, is an opportunity and a challenge for us (a) to focus on the language and communication strengths of our students/clients, as well as on areas needing development and improvement, and (b) to share more fully with our students/clients the responsibility for effective communication. The importance of this sharing is supported by the 1978 Federal Rehabilitation Act which requires "... provisions relating to the establishment and maintenance of minimum standards to assure the availability of personnel, to the maximum extent feasible, trained to communicate in the client's native language or mode of communication."

This paper discusses the Georgia (GA) and New York State (NYS) vocational rehabilitation (VR) programs for addressing this opportunity and challenge. Both programs involve an integrated approach for vocational rehabilitation personnel to have their sign communication skills assessed, and to use information from this assessment to identify appropriate options for improving their sign communication skills. Since both the GA and NYS programs use the same instrument for assessing sign communication skills, the Sign Communication Proficiency Interview (SCPI), the next section of this paper provides an overview of the SCPI. The subsequent two sections of this paper then provide a description of the GA and NYS VR sign skills assessment and development/learning programs for VR personnel.
An Overview of the SCPI

The Sign Communication Proficiency Interview (SCPI) is a direct, integrative assessment of a person's skill to use signing for communication. Persons taking an SCPI (referred to as interviewees or candidates) are interviewed in a one-to-one conversational format by an interviewer who is a proficient signer. Like the Language Proficiency Interview (LPI), from which it was adapted, the SCPI focuses on the specific communication needs of each candidate, addressing work and social topics. This assessment approach has the advantage, therefore, of providing both a standard methodology for assessing sign communication skills, and an opportunity to vary specific content based on each interviewee's communication needs and interests. In addition, it permits natural conversational feedback, thus allowing clarifying questions and other conversational strategies to be used by both interviewers and interviewees. This, importantly, allows for acceptable regional/dialectical differences in sign usage to contribute to our knowledge about interviewees' skills in communicating with deaf people in their geographical area.

Effort is made to assist interviewees to feel as comfortable as possible when taking an SCPI. This effort includes (a) sharing as much information as possible about the SCPI with interviewees prior to their SCPIs (for example, see Appendixes A and B for information shared with interviewees scheduled to take a General SCPI); (b) having four parts/phases to the SCPI that allow a "warm-up" and "wind-down" period for each interview (see Appendix C for a description of the four parts/phases of the SCPI); and (c) focusing on what a candidate can do and making suggestions for improving sign communication skills in SCPI result reports and follow-up discussions with interviewees. In brief, efforts are made to focus on the sign communication strengths of each interviewee, and to use this information to assist in discussing and planning future sign communication skills development/learning opportunities for candidates.

To assist in the reporting/discussion process, each interviewee's SCPI is videotaped and subsequently rated by three raters skilled in SCPI methodology. The basis for ratings is the SCPI Rating Scale (Table 1), a predetermined standard scale based on an "ideal," knowledgeable native or native-like signer. Following interviews and ratings, each interviewee receives an SCPI report which includes an SCPI rating that provides a general overview of the interviewee's skills in using signing for communication. Also, each interviewee is provided an opportunity to discuss her/his sign communication strengths and suggestions for improving sign communication skills with a sign communication specialist (see Appendix D), and/or a typed summary of her/his current sign skills along with recommendations for sign skills to focus on in subsequent opportunities for development of sign communication skills. (See Appendix E for a sample SCPI Raters' Report.)

The Georgia Division of Rehabilitation Services (DRS) Program For Sign Communication Skills Assessment And Development/Learning

Introduction

The Georgia (GA) Division of Rehabilitation Services (DRS) began preliminary work on a "model state plan" of services for deaf/hard-of-hearing persons as early as 1981. One issue that drew attention was the sign communication skills of staff providing services to applicants and clients who had hearing losses and used sign language. Feedback from some leaders in the deaf community had been less than complimentary of the sign communication skills of DRS staff who specialize in services to deaf/hard-of-hearing persons. The goal of having a "model state plan" was to ensure the highest quality of rehabilitation services possible to deaf/hard-of-hearing Georgians; improving the quality of services to these DRS clients would be brought about through recruiting trained, skilled specialists for future DRS staff vacancies and through sign communication skills development opportunities for current staff. The division also wanted to utilize special pay provisions to establish a salary supplement for staff highly skilled in sign communication. Implementation of a formal sign communication assessment system, therefore, would contribute to accomplishing three objectives: (a) planning appropriate sign communication skills development/learning opportunities for DRS staff, (b) supporting/justifying a salary supplement for DRS staff highly skilled in sign communication, and (c) recruitment and retention of skilled DRS staff.

Sign Communication Skills Assessment

Selection of an Assessment Instrument. A
TABLE 1

The Sign Communication Proficiency Interview (SCPI) Rating Scale

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ratings(^a)</th>
<th>Functional Descriptors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Superior Plus (+)</td>
<td>Able to use signing fluently and accurately to discuss in depth a variety of social and work topics. All aspects of signing are native-like, including breadth of vocabulary and idioms, grammar, colloquialisms, accent/production, and cultural references.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Superior</td>
<td>Able to use sign vocabulary and grammar with native-like fluency and accuracy for all formal and informal social and work needs. Comprehension, vocabulary, and grammar are excellent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced Plus (+)</td>
<td>Exhibits some superior level skills, but not all and not consistently.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced</td>
<td>Able to sign with sufficient grammatical accuracy and vocabulary to participate effectively in most formal and informal conversations on social and work topics. Conversation is generally fluent and shared. Comprehension is good, vocabulary is broad, grammar is good, and spontaneously elaborates on familiar topics when appropriate. Able to respond appropriately to unfamiliar topics.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate Plus (+)</td>
<td>Exhibits some advanced level skills, but not all and not consistently.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>Able to satisfy with some confidence routine social demands and work requirements. Demonstrates use of some sign grammatical features in connected discourse. Able to narrate and describe topics related to background, family, interests/hobbies, and work. Although some hesitations, fair to good control of everyday sign vocabulary is evident.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Survival Plus (+)</td>
<td>Exhibits some intermediate level skills, but not all and not consistently.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Survival</td>
<td>Able to satisfy basic survival needs in social and/or work situations. Can ask and answer basic questions and has some skills in creating sign utterances based on learned/memorized sign vocabulary. Can get into, through, and out of simple survival situations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Novice Plus (+)</td>
<td>Exhibits some survival level skills, but not all and not consistently.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Novice</td>
<td>Basically limited to single sign utterances with vocabulary primarily related to everyday social, question/topic areas such as names of family members, basic objects, colors, numbers, names of weekdays, and time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>No functional skills in signing.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\) Plus ratings indicate interviewee/candidate has some, but not all, of the sign communication skills for the next higher rating level.

search and review of assessment instruments for sign communication skills was begun in early 1983. Vocational rehabilitation agencies across the United States were contacted through Rehabnet in July, 1983. Other key resources contacted included Gallaudet University, National Association of the Deaf, American Deafness and Rehabilitation Association, National Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, and the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID). This search identified several sign assessment instruments and processes being used around the country. Those organizations contacted that did not have an assessment instrument or process were very interested in knowing what we found and/or developed.

The possibility of developing our own instrument was explored briefly. It was concluded that the identified instruments (and anything we developed) seemed untenable because of lack of experience with sign communication skills assessment, questionable reliability, and/or questionable validity. The instruments reviewed were all recently developed, and many were created by
individuals with minimal backgrounds or training in communication assessment of deaf/hard-of-hearing people.

Also, the procedures used were based on those used to evaluate interpreters, with no "communicative interaction." In brief, the procedures reviewed did not simulate the natural situation that people face in the normal give-and-take of conversation, which is the primary communication situation for DRS staff and clients.

Contact was then made with the Sign Communication Department at NTID, which was working on an assessment instrument. The contact was encouraging because the initial impression about the assessment instrument (the Sign Communication Proficiency Interview/SCPI), and the process for its use, was very positive. This favorable impression was based on the following: (a) the SCPI is based on a well respected, widely used oral language skills assessment instrument (the Language/Oral Proficiency Interview) developed by the U.S. Foreign Service Institute in the 1940's; (b) the SCPI involves a one-to-one conversation, which, as stated earlier, is the primary communication situation for DRS staff and clients; (c) the SCPI involves three independent ratings for each interview, with options for additional ratings and interviews as appropriate, thus allowing "checks" on reliability of results; (d) the SCPI focuses on what a person "can do," as well as providing information on sign communication skill areas for development/improvement; and (e) the SCPI may be used as part of a program that integrates the assessment process with appropriate opportunities for sign skills development/instruction. A thorough review of the SCPI confirmed the initial positive impressions of the potential use of the SCPI in an integrated sign skills assessment and development/instructional program for DRS staff and staff applicants.

The system was easily accepted because of several key characteristics of the SCPI, including three independent ratings per interview, face validity, the fact that the interviews were "live," and the fact that the SCPI is based on the LPI, a widely accepted language assessment instrument.

Establishment of Minimum and Preferred Sign Communication Skill Standards. The establishment of minimum levels of expected sign communication skills was a pivotal issue. DRS recognized that client benefits from staff highly skilled in counseling and/or teaching were significantly reduced when these staff lacked effective sign communication skills. In other words, professional staff cannot use their "other" skills with persons with whom they cannot communicate effectively. Careful review of the SCPI rating scale functional descriptors (see Table 1) made it obvious that counseling and teaching required skills above the Intermediate rating level at a minimum. Therefore, for DRS staff having counseling and/or teaching as primary job responsibilities, the division selected Intermediate Plus as the minimal SCPI rating level, since this level requires persons to demonstrate some advanced level skills. It is hard to envision counseling or teaching being effective when skills are less than "generally fluent and shared" or comprehension is less than "good." As Caccamise and Johnson (1978, pp. 108-109) stated:

Basically, how can a "clinician" who cannot communicate with a client, provide appropriate assessment services, and even more important, the counseling services needed by the client for adjusting to a complex and often indifferent and even hostile society?

Recognizing that persons in several different DRS staff positions have contact with deaf/hard-of-hearing clients, a review of DRS staff communication needs and the SCPI rating scale was conducted. Based on this review, minimum and preferred sign communication skill levels were identified for ten DRS staff positions. These positions and their corresponding minimum and preferred sign skill communication standards are listed in Table 2.

Selection and Training of SCPI Personnel.

In order to implement a system using the SCPI, interviewers and raters needed to be trained. The DRS opted for SCPI training of consultants from outside the division, because use of "non-DRS staff" would contribute to three desirable outcomes: (a) dispensing of the problem/criticism of DRS staff assessing other DRS staff; (b) involving Deaf community members in the process; and (c) enabling the assessment system to be more readily available to publics outside the division.

The division established high standards for SCPI team members. Interviewers and raters were required to successfully complete an SCPI
### TABLE 2

Preliminary Minimum and Preferred Sign Communication Proficiency Standards for Georgia (GA) Division of Rehabilitation Services (DRS) Personnel Based on the Sign Communication Proficiency Interview (SCPI)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GA DRS Job Position/Title</th>
<th>Sign Communication Proficiency Standards</th>
<th>Minimum SCPI Rating</th>
<th>Preferred SCPI Rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Field Counselor</td>
<td></td>
<td>Intermediate Plus</td>
<td>Advanced Plus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Facility Counselor</td>
<td></td>
<td>Intermediate Plus</td>
<td>Advanced Plus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Facility Evaluator</td>
<td></td>
<td>Intermediate Plus</td>
<td>Advanced Plus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Facility Adjustment Instructor</td>
<td></td>
<td>Intermediate Plus</td>
<td>Advanced Plus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Facility Work Adjustment Instructor</td>
<td></td>
<td>Intermediate Plus</td>
<td>Advanced Plus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Secretary/Typist</td>
<td></td>
<td>Novice Plus</td>
<td>Intermediate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Rehabilitation Employment Specialist</td>
<td></td>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>Advanced Plus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Supervisor/Manager</td>
<td></td>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>Advanced Plus</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Eight persons participated in the first rater workshop training; eighteen staff members participated in mock interviews to help train the participants. Also, this provided DRS staff a “peek” at the SCPI process and instrument. At a second training workshop the experienced SCPI raters/interviewers received a review and in-depth update on SCPI report writing. This review and update focused on supporting SCPI ratings by writing specific statements (including examples) relative to (a) current sign skills, (b) sign skill areas needing improvement, and (c) recommendations for priority sign skill areas to address in subsequent opportunities for sign skills development/learning.

### TABLE 3

Number of Georgia (GA) Division of Rehabilitation Services (DRS) Personnel by Job Position Achieving Each SCPI Rating Level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GA DRS Position</th>
<th>SCPI Ratings</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>sup+</td>
<td>sup-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Field Counselors</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Facility Counselors</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Facility Evaluators</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Facility Adjustment Instructors</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Facility Work Adjustment Instructors</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Human Services Technicians</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Secretaries/Typists</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Rehabilitation Employment Specialists</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Supervisors-Managers</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Houseparents</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td>-</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Key:** sup=Superior, sur=Survival, adv=Advanced, nov=Novice, int=Intermediate

- Dash (-) indicates no one received a rating at this level.
- One Facility Evaluator received a rating of “0/No Functional Sign Skills.”
THE GEORGIA AND NEW YORK STATE PROGRAM FOR ASSESSING AND DEVELOPING SIGN COMMUNICATION SKILLS OF REHABILITATION PERSONNEL

(See Appendix E.)

Assessment Results. As of October, 1987, 55 DRS staff had received SCPIs. Tables 3 and 4 summarize the results of these assessments. As shown in Table 4, of the 55 staff assessed, 10 (18.2%) achieved the preferred sign skill level, 10 (18.2%) achieved the minimum sign skill level, and 35 (63.6%) achieved below the minimum sign skill level.

The Future

The Georgia DRS is strongly committed to hiring and maintaining highly skilled staff to work with deaf and hard-of-hearing clients. Therefore, the DRS plans to use its commitment to providing quality services for these clients, as evidenced by the program described above, to support a salary supplement for DRS staff who have achieved specific sign skill levels. The current plan is to propose that staff who demonstrate sign communication skills at or above the preferred sign skill proficiency level, receive a salary supplement of up to 10%.

The DRS has begun implementing a long term process designed to improve and maintain the quality of rehabilitation services available to deaf/hard-of-hearing Georgians. In addition to benefits for clients, anticipated benefits of this process include motivation for current DRS staff to improve their sign communication skills and to continue their work with deaf/hard-of-hearing DRS clients, and motivation for experienced, skilled professionals to apply for DRS staff positions.

TABLE 4

Number of Georgia (GA) Division of Rehabilitation Services (DRS) Personnel Achieving Preferred and Minimum Sign Proficiency Levels, and Number Below Minimum Level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GA DRS Job Position</th>
<th>Achievement Relative To Proficiency Standards</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Preferred Sign Level</td>
<td>Minimum Sign Level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Field Counselors</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Facility Counselors</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Facility Evaluators</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Facility Adjustment Instructors</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Facility Work Adjustment Instructors</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Human Services Technicians</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Secretaries/Typists</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Rehabilitation Employment Specialists</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Supervisors/Managers</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Houseparents</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(18.2%) (18.2%) (63.6%)

Sign Communication Skills Development/ Learning Opportunities

Information about opportunities for sign communication skills development/learning has been shared with all appropriate DRS staff. These instructional opportunities have ranged from four days for staff with high sign communication skills to twelve days (over three months) for staff with lower sign communication skills. All instruction has been provided by a consultant who is a highly skilled, deaf signer (Superior Plus on the SCPI Rating Scale). This instructor, who is one of the trained SCPI interviewers/raters, has participated in an eight-week, sign instruction professional development internship at NTID with all expenses covered by DRS.
The New York State Office Of Vocational Rehabilitation Program For Sign Communication Skills Assessment And Development/Learning

Introduction

New York State (NYS) has the second largest population of deaf people in the United States. For years, the NYS Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR) has provided service to many deaf and hard-of-hearing clients who communicate in sign language. Although OVR had staff who were unofficially recognized as “deafness specialists,” their sign communication skills had never been formally evaluated. Then, in 1983, the New York Model State Plan for Services to Deaf People was published, and the New York Deafness Advisory Committee studied the functions and qualifications of the position of Rehabilitation Counselor for the Deaf (RCD). The “ability to communicate with most deaf clients” was specified as an important qualification for an RCD. In 1986, the NYS Department of Civil Service granted approval for the job title of “Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor (Manual Communication).”

Sign Communication Skills Assessment

Based on a review of several sign communication assessment instruments, the Sign Communication Proficiency Interview (SCPI) was selected for use with RCDs. The SCPI rating scale was studied and an “Intermediate” rating was determined as the minimum required sign skill level for RCDs (see Table 1). Therefore, all new counselors hired as RCDs are required to demonstrate intermediate or higher level sign skills on the SCPI. In addition, all counselors already employed who wished to qualify for the RCD position were required to take the SCPI. Efforts were made to reduce the anxiety that often accompanies evaluations. VR counseling staff members were shown videotape samples of the SCPI and were provided with packets of information about the SCPI.

Since the SCPI is part of the Civil Service process, any conflict of interest must be avoided. Therefore, since the staff at NTID has no vested interest in the results of sign assessments with VR staff, they were hired on a consultant basis to administer and rate SCPIs.

In March, 1986, the SCPI was administered to 27 staff currently employed as RCDs or RCD Counselor Assistants. Confidentiality of results was guaranteed and an appeal process put into effect. Following the SCPI, a survey of staff was taken to determine their reaction. Prior to receiving their SCPI results, 25 (92.6%) of the 27 staff members receiving SCPIs indicated they believed the SCPI was a fair evaluation of their sign communication skills.

Table 5 provides a summary of the SCPI results for the 27 NYS RCDs taking the SCPI in March, 1986. These results show that 17 (63%) of these 27 RCDs and RCD Counselor Assistants achieved at or above the minimum required sign skill level (SCPI rating of Intermediate). Since March, 1986, opportunities for improving their sign communication skills have been discussed with all RCDs and RCD Counselor Assistants, and the 10 RCDs not achieving the minimum required sign skill level have been provided one year to upgrade their skills to this level.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NYS OVR Position</th>
<th>SCPI Ratings</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>sup+</td>
<td>sup-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. RCDs</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. RCD Counselor Assistants</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals</strong></td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*a Key: sup=Superior, sur=Survival, adv=Advanced, nov=Novice int=Intermediate

*b Dash (-) indicates no one received a rating at this level.
TABLE 6

Number of Rehabilitation Counselors for the Deaf (RCDs) and RCD Counselor Assistants, NYS Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR), Achieving Minimum or Above Sign Proficiency Levels, and Number Below Minimum Level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NYS OVR Job Position</th>
<th>Achievement Relative To Proficiency Standards</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Minimum Sign Level or Above Below Minimum Sign Level</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. RCDs</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. RCD Counselor Assistants</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>17 (63%)</td>
<td>10 (37%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sign Communication Skills Development/Learning Opportunities

Private tutoring in sign has been provided for staff on a request basis. Also, during the summer of 1986, a one-week intensive sign class was provided at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf, and in the summer of 1987, a two-week intensive sign class was given at Gallaudet University under the joint direction of Gallaudet and NTID staff. Curriculum for the classes has been based on the actual VR setting, with VR forms used for role play and instruction. RCDs below the minimum sign skill level were strongly encouraged to attend the two summer classes, and those at or above this skill level were given the option to attend. Partial funding for this program was obtained from a special grant from the Governor’s Office of Employee Relations and the Union of Public Employees Federation. The remainder of the funding was from funds in the Training Unit of the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation.

In July, 1987, the SCPI was administered to seven RCDs participating in the summer sign class at Gallaudet University, who had achieved below the minimum sign skill level of Intermediate in March, 1986. Of these seven, five achieved an SCPI rating level of Intermediate and two remained below Intermediate.

Implications

As with any language communication skills, sign skills are best acquired by a non-native user as part of an on-going process. The speed of acquiring sign skills will vary from individual to individual and will depend on a number of factors including motivation, effort extended, type of training and amount of training, and self-confidence. There is a need for sign instruction that is pertinent to the work environment of VR counselors, readily available, and uniform in quality. Sign instructional materials and a standardized curriculum need to be developed.

Many NYS RCDs have learned sign language on their own. It is to their credit that they were willing to take part in this initial effort to evaluate and improve communication skills. The use of an assessment system must be seen as part of this process, and should not be attempted without ongoing opportunities for improving sign communication skills; that is, the assessment and skills development process should be developmental, not punitive.

Summary and Conclusions

The GA and NYS vocational rehabilitation (VR) sign skills assessment and development programs for VR personnel have been described. These programs demonstrate the commitment of vocational rehabilitation personnel in these two states to focus on the strengths of their clients (as well as areas needing development and improvement), and to share with their clients the responsibility for effective communication. It is our hope that sharing information about these programs will encourage others to accept this same opportunity and challenge, and in so doing, to take a significant step toward improving the quality of vocational rehabilitation services for deaf and hard-of-hearing clients. As stated by Gloria Kemp, the 1987-88 President of the American Deafness and Rehabilitation Association, in a letter of invitation to the National Conference on Communication Assessment and Training for...
Deafness Rehabilitation Specialists:

. . . the more information we can pro-
vide and the more committed State
Agency people become with the whole
idea of assessment of communication
skills, the better chance we will have
toward providing quality communica-
tion for hearing-impaired clients in the
rehabilitation programs.

(Personal communication, September 11, 1987)

We believe the GA and NYS sign skills assess-
ment and development programs described in
this article will lead both to increased job satis-
faction among vocational rehabilitation person-
nel and to improvement in the quality of services
for deaf and hard-of-hearing clients . . . in essence,
shared benefits for both vocational rehabilitation
personnel and clients via sharing the opportunity
and challenge for effective communication.

FOOTNOTES

1 The SCPI is also currently used by the Louisiana School for the Deaf (LSD) and Michigan School for the Deaf (MSD), the Minne-
sota State Academy for the Deaf (MSAD), and the National Technical Institute for the Deaf. For discussion of the use of the SCPI
by LSD and MSAD, see Caccamise, Newell, and Mitchell-Caccamise (1983) and Newell, Caccamise, Tebo, and McAdam

2 For further information about types of language/communication assessments and factors to consider in selecting an assessment
instrument, see Battison and Caccamise (1980).

3 Interviewees/candidates may choose to take a General SCPI or an American Sign Language SCPI. For discussion of this, see Cacca-

4 For further information about the GA DRS “model plan” for quality services for deaf/hard-of-hearing clients, see Quality Rehabili-

5 NTID personnel, GA VR personnel, and NYS VR personnel have recently initiated a project to identify and document, via videotapes
and a manual, signs currently used by skilled signers for vocabulary important to the communication needs of VR personnel. If you
are interested in participating in this project, and/or would like additional information about the project, please contact the first
author of this publication.

REFERENCES


of the Academy of Rehabilitative Audiology, 11, 105-130.


communicative competence of Louisiana School for the Deaf dormitory counselor applicants. Journal of the Academy of Reha-
bilitative Audiology, 16, 283-304.


Newell, W., Caccamise, F., Boardman, K., & Holcomb, B. R. (1983). Adaptation of the Language Proficiency Interview (LPI) for
assessing sign communicative competence. Sign Language Studies, 41, 311-352 (includes comments from and authors’
response to two reviewers).

Manuscript submitted for publication.
APPENDIX A

General Sign Communication Proficiency Interview (SCPI) Procedures:
Information for Candidates

1. We will have a conversation about social and work topics. I will ask you questions, and you should ask me questions.

2. We want to get the best sample of your signing skills. Therefore, generally I will use only signs when I ask you questions. This is to test your reception for signs alone when there is no speech. Sometimes, however, I may use signs with lip movement or signs with voice.

3. In order to allow you to demonstrate your best sign communication skills, we recommend that you not use voice during our conversation (some/natural lip movement is ok). Also, please try to maintain a good "signing posture"; that is, please sit upright and do not cross legs.

4. If requested, you will have the opportunity to use your simultaneous communication skills (speech and signing together) later in this interview.

5. We will evaluate your signing skills, including: (a) sign vocabulary; (b) clarity and control of sign production; (c) use of sign grammar (for example, use of space, sign directionality, and time indicators); (d) fluency or smoothness of sign and fingerspelling production; and (e) flexibility to communicate receptively and expressively along the English/ASL sign continuum.

6. This interview allows you to demonstrate your highest skill level. There are no trick questions.

7. Please answer my questions as completely as possible.

Do you have any questions? Please use signing to ask them.

NOTE: PLEASE USE YOUR BEST SIGNING
APPENDIX B

Tips for Candidates on How to Take a Sign Communication Proficiency Interview (SCPI)

1. **RELAX:** Sip a cup of coffee, rub your hands, talk about the weather—anything that will help you to relax and be confident.

2. **RATE OF SIGNING:** Sign at a rate that is comfortable for you. If you know that you make many mistakes when you sign quickly, slow down.

3. **KEEP SIGNING:** Don’t stop the conversation by signing simply YES or NO. Be generous. Give details, explain your point, develop your thoughts, and make comparisons. Anything that shows you can discuss a topic in depth will help you perform better. If you are not a “talkative” person by nature, you must make an extra effort to communicate during the interview.

4. **DON’T DOWNGRADE YOURSELF:** Don’t apologize for your signing skills. Be positive. Let the interview show your skills.

WHAT TO DO . . .

1. **IF YOU MAKE A MISTAKE:** If you know you made a mistake, correct it and continue. Correcting a mistake can help your performance.

2. **IF YOU ARE LOST IN A LONG EXPLANATION:** Stop. Think. Say something like, “Let me tell you again—it is complicated.” Then try again. Don’t worry about what happened. No one expects you to sign without mistakes.

3. **IF YOU BECOME NERVOUS DURING THE INTERVIEW:** The interviewer will know you are nervous and help you. You can stop for a few seconds and get control. Relax. Admit that you are nervous and joke about it. Often this is enough to make you comfortable again.

4. **IF SOMETHING IS INTERFERING WITH YOUR SIGNING:** If the air conditioner bothers you, say so. If you can’t see the interviewer clearly, say so. Remember that this is your interview. You should have the best possible interview conditions.
APPENDIX C

Sign Communication Proficiency Interview (SCPI) Structure: Four Parts/Phases
(Adapted from Liskin-Gasparro, 1982)

Each interview contains four phases: Warm-Up, Level Check, Probes, and Wind-down. The two major phases of the interview are the Level Check and Probes. The following is a brief description of each phase of the interview.

The Warm-Up
This phase consists of social conversation to help candidates relax. This phase provides candidates an opportunity to become accustomed to the language/communicative style of interviewers and “warm-up” to the interview situation.
During this phase, interviewers make preliminary estimations of candidates’ highest sign skill levels. Generally, a warm-up should take only a few (2-4) minutes.

The Level Check
After the Warm-Up interviewers move into the Level Check phase. The purpose of this phase is to determine the highest level at which candidates can sustain sign conversation.

Interviewers begin this phase by asking a question at the proficiency level estimated during the Warm-Up. This is the phase which should consume the most time (10-15 minutes). Interviewers attempt to explore the breadth and depth of candidates’ sign skills. Interviewers want to answer the basic questions posed by the rating definitions; that is, How fluent are the candidates?, How well do they receive and express signs?, How accurate is the grammar?, How wide is the vocabulary?

When candidates satisfy interviewers regarding their probable highest level of performance this provides the floor to the rating. The next phase tries to find the ceiling.

The Probes
Probes are questions or situations which challenge candidates to perform at the next higher level. A probe for intermediate candidates might be a question which asks them to describe in detail or to narrate at length. Probes should be used a few times in each interview to confirm that the apparent rating is accurate. Probes should result in linguistic faltering, difficulty, or breakdown. If probes result in successful performance then the initial level check was probably too low and probing and level-checking should continue until interviewers are sure they have collected a valid, ratable sample. This phase generally takes 4-6 minutes.

The Wind-Down
The purpose of the Wind-Down is to provide candidates a sense of accomplishment. The wind-down consists of a few questions at or below each candidate’s sign skill level. During the probing and level-checking some amount of difficulty in using sign has probably been encountered by candidates. The wind-down allows candidates to feel successful at the end of the interview. This phase generally takes 2-3 minutes.

After the Wind-Down interviewers should thank candidates for their time and close the interview.
APPENDIX D

Sign Communication Proficiency Interview (SCPI) Report of Results for Candidates

To
From
Date
Subject
SCPI Coordinator
Your SCPI Results

Your Sign Communication Proficiency Interview (SCPI) rating is _________. The SCPI Rating Scale (on the other side of this memo) will help you understand your rating.

If you wish to view your interview tape and/or you wish more information about your interview and rating, you may request a meeting by contacting the SCPI Coordinator. If you wish to discuss your SCPI results, this discussion may include (a) a discussion of your sign communication strengths, and (b) suggestions for improving your sign communication skills. You should request this meeting within two weeks from the date you receive this SCPI rating report.
Please explain why you awarded this rating. Be specific and try to relate your explanation to the rating descriptors.

- Responds in 1-4 sentences to social questions with generally shorter (1-2 sentence) responses to work related questions.
- Has good basic sign vocabulary for work and hobbies (GALLAUDET, FISHING, DEAF).
- Production fair-good for basic signs but some misproductions of numbers and basic signs (WATER, ALL-NIGHT, DIVORCE) with clear but slow fingerspelling (and elbow/arm out and too high for fingerspelling).
- “Developing” basic sign grammar features such as use of classifiers (CL:3 for CAR), sign directionality for verb/pronoun incorporation (ASK ME), and number incorporation.
- Comprehension fair for basic conversational questions, with some problems with fingerspelling reception and reception of longer questions signed at a normal rate.

Please write some suggestions for how this candidate may improve her/his sign and/or simultaneous communication skills.

- Improve control of basic signs vocabulary (especially numbers) and expand sign vocabulary.
- Increase fingerspelling rate (be sure to maintain clarity).
- Continue to develop skills in use of sign grammatical features.
- Improve comprehension, especially for fingerspelling.