



AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE TEACHERS ASSOCIATION

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American Sign Language (ASL) is accepted by colleges and universities and has been accepted in fulfillment of the modern/foreign language requirements at the high school, bachelor's, and master's levels in schools and states across the United States (Wilcox, 1992, Cooper, 1997). According to the Modern Language Association data, ASL has been fairly steady in enrollment since 2013 in institutions of higher education. Over 40 states officially recognize ASL as a language. Research on ASL is regularly published in scholarly journals such as Sign Language Studies, American Annals of the Deaf, the Deaf American Monograph and Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education. Numerous conferences occur in areas of ASL teaching and linguistics, Deaf Studies and ASL Literature. All of these activities point to the need for a national organization of teachers of ASL and Deaf Studies. The ASLTA fulfills this need. ASLTA is a national, professional organization of American Sign Language and Deaf Studies teachers established since 1975. ASLTA was affiliated with the National Association of the Deaf (NAD) from 1975 to 2004. The Mission of ASLTA is to perpetuate, preserve, and promote American Sign Language (ASL) and Deaf Culture through excellence in teaching. This includes teaching ASL as a heritage or first language, as a second language, and as part of Deaf Studies.

Why Are These Guidelines Important to You as a Program Administrator?

ASL, according to Bauman and Murray (2014), Robinson and Henner (2018), is critical for crippling institutions of higher education. ASL instruction not only allows non-deaf students to interact with Deaf culture and Disability culture but also to explore the intersections of these as they apply to their societal interactions. This sentiment is not limited to institutions of higher education. According to Robinson and Henner (2018), "ASL classrooms present a forum for institutions to confront disability, systems and dynamics of power associated with ability, and linguistic inequity between spoken and signed languages. ASL reminds us that language is not limited to oral speech systems and that people can communicate complex academic ideas, craft poetry and stories, and share thoughts and feelings without speaking through the mouth." As an administrator of a program that employs individuals who teach ASL, it is critical to hire instructors who are competent, knowledgeable, and proficient in the use and application of ASL as well as ASL pedagogy.



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What Qualifications Should You Look for in an ASL Teacher?

Degree Attainment and Training

The field of ASL instruction continues to maintain its growth as a language offered in K-12 and higher education settings. According to the most recent report by the Modern Language Association (MLA) (Looney & Lusin, 2016), between 1990-2016 ASL has seen a 6,582.9 percent increase in enrollments and maintains its status as the third most commonly enrolled language behind Spanish and French. The American Sign Language Teachers association has, as of 2016, overhauled its certification system to include two certification levels, Certified and Master. This is in response to the growth that has been evident in ASL teaching preparation programs. While there are a limited number of programs that offer degrees specific to ASL teaching methodology, many programs offer a Deaf studies or linguistics-type program that provides the extensive content knowledge base one would need for an ASL teaching career. What this does not include are programs that are specifically geared towards an ASL minor degree or ASL interpreting degrees. While students learn ASL and cultural content in these programs, they are not extensive in terms of the content base one needs to teach the languages and cultures of the American Deaf communities.

Teaching Certification

ASLTA, as mentioned, offers two tiers of certification, Certified and Master (ASLTA, 2020). These two certifications are established to ensure that individuals seeking to teach ASL have met the professional standards set forth by the ASLTA and peer organizations, including the American Council on Teaching Foreign Languages (ACTFL). The two certifications each have a specified number of items that need to be included in a portfolio that will be evaluated. Two evaluators chosen by the evaluation and certification director of ASLTA will do the review. Should the two evaluators not agree a third evaluator will be utilized for the final decision. For the Certified level there are four total required portfolio expectations to be met. Candidates must have completed 3 credit hours each within ASL Literature, ASL Linguistics, and Deaf Culture/Deaf Community. An examination interview can be requested in lieu of official course completion. The candidate must demonstrate teaching competency through a video demonstration as well as supporting documents such as lesson plans and assessment materials and proof of proficiency to be explained in the next section.



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The Master level has a total of seven required portfolio expectations that must be met. The candidate must have completed the following courses: ASL Literature, ASL Linguistics, Deaf Culture/Deaf Community, Teaching Methods (ASL or Foreign Language), Assessment Tools, and Curriculum Development OR Language Acquisition. An interview examination cannot be requested in lieu of course completion for this level. The candidate must demonstrate teaching competency through a video demonstration, supporting documents such as lesson plans and assessment materials, and proof of proficiency to be explained in a later section (ASLTA, 2020). A degree is a required component to apply for certification at either level. For the Certified level a B.A., B.S. degree (or higher) or 20 years' experience of teaching ASL must be documented. For the Master's level a candidate must have a B.A or B.S. degree (or higher). Additionally, several states are currently pursuing or may have already established licensure requirements for ASL instruction at the state government level.

What does not constitute certification and licensure:

Any license or certifications from the following entities: Certification as an interpreter, for example, certification from the NAD-RID National Council on Interpreting (NAD-RID NCI), the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID), National Association of the Deaf (NAD), the Educational Interpreter Performance Assessment (EIPA), or Board for Evaluation of Interpreters (BEI) certification program. Additionally, the ASL Proficiency Interview (ASLPI) or the Sign Language Proficiency Interview: ASL (SLPI:ASL) alone are not appropriate measures of ability to teach ASL and should not be used as a substitute for ASLTA certification or state licensure as a modicum of assessment regarding pedagogical knowledge.

ASL Language Proficiency

There are two assessments that measure ASL language proficiency used by the ASLTA certification body, both will be briefly explained.

American Sign Language Proficiency Interview (ASLPI) is a 20–25-minute video recorded interactive dialogue between a signer and an ASLPI interviewer. The ASLPI is a holistic language evaluation designed to determine global ASL proficiency, rated by a team of evaluators on an overall proficiency level in accordance with a 0-5 rating scale.



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This rating scale was developed from a foundational source, the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) of the US Department of State, and adapted with respect toward ASL (ASLPI, 2021).

The Sign Language Proficiency Interview: ASL (SLPI:ASL) is an interview that takes place conversationally in ASL between an interviewer and the interviewee. Interview content of this process varies based on the interviewee present in the interview. This assessment was adapted from the Language/Oral Proficiency Interview (L/OPI). The interview is recorded and then is rated independently by SLPI:ASL raters.

The SLPI:ASL is used to assess how well people are able to use American Sign Language for communication and/or to provide developmental feedback on improving sign language communication skills (RIT, 2020)

Explanations and examples of the rating scales of the above proficiency assessments can be found at their respective assessment websites:

ASLPI-<https://www.gallaudet.edu/the-american-sign-language-proficiency-interview/aslpi/>

SLPI:ASL-<https://www.rit.edu/ntid/slpi/team/commonforms>

When considering proficiency in a language and the ability to master it in order to teach the language, it must be kept in mind that the majority of individuals begin their ASL learning progress in grades 9-12. Kemp (1998) discusses the nuances of various language acquisition stages one must go through prior to being able to master the language. According to Kemp (1998), for someone who is not a native signer to achieve the level of proficiency to conceptually understand the nuances in order to have the ability to teach the language, it would, by their guesstimation, take eight years over the course of learning ASL from K-12 to post-secondary to do so.

Professional Affiliation and Professional Development

Being a member of a professional affiliated organization does not guarantee a prospective teacher is “qualified or competent.” It can be an indicator that the individual is driven toward the pursuit of professional development and engagement within their profession amongst their peers.



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Members of ASLTA have a strong drive to become certified as soon as they are qualified to do so and often proceed into the ASLTA evaluation process. ASLTA provides a national conference biannually and many regional and local affiliated chapters of ASLTA provide workshops/conferences in between the national biennial conferences. If the prospective teacher is unaware of the national conference, professional development opportunities, or the existence of local chapters of ASLTA, this should raise a red flag in your hiring process.

Native versus Non-Native teachers of language

Non-native versus native teachers of languages is an issue debated among all foreign language teaching organizations. This issue is debated within the profession of ASL teaching as well.

Like other professional organizations of language teachers, the ASLTA believes what counts most are the qualifications of the potential teacher as outlined in the previous section. Most important are the teaching skills and knowledge of the potential teacher's ability to represent the language and culture as authentically as possible.

Naturally, if given a choice between two equally qualified individuals, choosing a Deaf native signer may offer students an authentic and enriching experience to learn ASL. Deaf teachers often can offer unique insights to their students based on their life experiences that hearing teachers may not be able to offer. Hearing teachers of ASL also may bring strengths to the learning experience for students. For example, knowing that a hearing individual has accomplished a native-like proficiency in ASL and an understanding of Deaf culture through interaction within the Deaf community can be inspiring to students of ASL. They may be able to see that it is truly possible for hearing people to learn and use ASL effectively.

In one sense, a hearing teacher can act as a role model for adult learners of ASL. In programs with multiple levels of instruction it may be appropriate to consciously seek to have both Deaf and hearing teachers. It is the policy of ASLTA not to discriminate on the basis of hearing status. We believe it is important above all that teachers are qualified and competent. Holding ASLTA certification is one way of ensuring that a teacher is qualified to teach ASL, regardless of whether the individual is D/deaf or hearing. We hope you will make ASLTA certification an important criterion in your selection process for teachers of ASL. Signed languages are here to stay.



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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'James M. Wilson'.

James M. Wilson
President

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Rhonda L. Jennings-Arey'.

Rhonda L. Jennings-Arey
Secretary