American Sign Language Competency: Comparing Student Readiness for Entry into a Four-Year Interpreter Degree Program

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Abstract

Foundational language competence is directly related to a student interpreters' success in interpreter education and ultimately, certification readiness upon graduation. This study focused on the American Sign Language (ASL) expressive competence of applicants to a four-year ASL English interpretation major through a pre-program screening of 250 applicants over eight years. Applicants' ASL expressive competence compared scores of those who held two-year interpreting degrees to those who had completed four semesters of ASL. Data showed that applicants from two-year interpreting programs and applicants who have taken four semesters of ASL possessed similar expressive ASL competence. This study further examined if applicants with a two-year degree in interpreting were able to transfer into a four-year interpreting program with year three language skills. This study provided quantifiable evidence for addressing inefficiencies in interpreter education that negatively impacted both the student interpreters, and the quality of services provided to stakeholders.

Keywords: interpreter education, pre-program entry screening, expressive ASL competence

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Pre-program entry screening (Johnson & Witter-Merithew, 2004; Boegner Godfrey, 2010) with foundational ASL and English competence assessment is identified as a strategy to increase the success of students who graduate from interpreter education programs in the United States (US) (Johnson & Witter-Merithew, 2004; Winston, 2005). "Language fluency [or competency] must be mastered prior to program entry so focus during the course of the interpreting program can build on the pre-existing skills and demands" - this allows for "concentration on more complex interpreting skills" (Boegner Godfrey, 2010, p. 22). Ball (2013) further emphasizes that successful completion of interpreter education is directly related to the student's ASL competence at the time of admission.

Historically, members of the D/deaf community in the US determined if an individual had sufficient ASL competence and evaluated whether they would act in the best communicative interests of the Deaf Community (Fant, 1990; Cokely, 2005). As the field of ASL-English interpreting education further developed in the US, interpreter education programs began considering how to more effectively evaluate potential students through pre-program entry screenings primarily managed by both D/deaf professionals and interpreting practitioners (Hunt & Nicodemus, 2014). Boegner Godfrey (2010) conducted a review of the entrance requirements of five programs in the US. Of those, four had rigorous requirements for entry into the interpreting portion of the program. The findings of the Boegner Godfrey (2010) study demonstrate the initial application of research findings by establishing screening of applicants' ASL competence prior to entering interpreter education programs.

For the purpose of this current study, the term "ASL I-IV" refers to four semesters of ASL coursework, with each course typically ranging between 3-5 credit hours, which equates to between 45 and 75 clock hours of faculty-student interaction (where 1 credit hour is equal to 15 class contact hours). The term "two-year degree in interpreting" here refers to an associate-level degree in the US in the field of ASL-English interpreting. Such an associate-level degree ranges from 60-80 credit hours, the majority of which involve language and interpreting skills coursework. An associate-level degree is usually completed in two-years or more at community colleges, technical colleges, and some universities. Overall such courses involve at least between 900 to 1200 clock hours of faculty-student interaction. All two-year degrees in interpreting discussed in this study include a minimum of four semesters of ASL coursework (ASL I-IV coursework).

This study reports on the ASL-English Interpretation (ASLEI) bachelor's degree program at the University of Northern Colorado (UNC) which has administered a proprietary pre-program entry screening called the ASL Demonstration of Competency (DOC) since 2007. Some consistent trends noted by UNC ASLEI academic advisors led to a formal analysis of DOC results and prior educational experience of applicants. The research reported here investigated the following questions:

1. How do applicants with a two-year degree in ASL-English interpretation compare to those who had only completed coursework in ASL I-IV in regard to their respective competence in the production of American Sign Language, referred to as expressive ASL competence?

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2. Do applicants with a two-year degree in interpreting transfer with expressive skills suitable for entry to year three of a four-year interpreter education program?

To answer these questions, the authors reviewed the available literature in the field. This overview of the literature will be presented next, followed by the chosen methodological approach and the findings of the study.

1. Literature review and background

1.1. History of interpreter education in the United States

The Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) is a national organization in the US which was established in 1964. Since that time the demand for ASL-English interpreters in the US has increased as laws were passed that recognized the need for interpreting services for both adults and children. These public laws include the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1965 (PL 89-333), the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (PL 93-112), the Education of All Handicapped Children Act (PL 94-142), the Federal Court Interpreters Act (PL 95-539), the Telecommunications Act, and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (Witter-Merithew & Johnson, 2005).

In 1990 Lou Fant compiled a history of the first 25 years of ASL-English interpreting profession in the US. In this historical narrative of the RID and the field of ASL interpreting, he identified the lack of competent ASL-English interpreters which led to recruitment of new individuals to become interpreters (Fant 1990). Those willing to enter the profession needed training, and in 1974 the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) began funding training programs with the goal of developing and implementing training courses for individuals without prior interpreting experience who already had some ASL competence (Cokely, 2005; Frishberg, 1990). The goal of these grant-funded programs was to help develop more work-ready interpreters. However, there was limited research and understanding of how to approach interpreter education and curriculum development at the time. As a result, courses were developed that varied in terms of duration and content. In addition, the training programs that were established at that time lacked the level of rigor that prospective interpreters would have received from within the D/deaf community (Cokely, 2005).

By the 1980s, when the number of programs had grown to over fifty, interpreter educators determined that these skills-focused training programs should incorporate both comprehensive skills training as well as a liberal arts education (Cokely, 2005; Boegner Godfrey, 2010). ASL-English interpreting programs were beginning to see a new student base and students entering the programs did not always have close ties with the D/deaf community, or possessed minimal or no ASL competence, which meant they required additional extensive courses in ASL (Fant, 1990; Cokely, 2005). A further shift involved academic institutions taking on responsibility for the admission screening process, which meant the D/deaf community's role as gatekeepers to the profession was reduced (Cokely, 2005).

It became clear to educators that two years was insufficient time for students to develop the necessary ASL language competence and ASL-English interpreting skills (Johnson & Witter-Merithew, 2004; Cokely, 2005; Humphrey 2000). This led to discussions regarding the need to develop four-year degree programs (Humphrey, 2000; Johnson & Witter-Merithew, 2004; Boegner Godfrey, 2010). Along with this shift in thinking came the transition - which some would argue is still evolving - from "interpreter training" which reflected a trade-based or a "distinctly vocational profile" to "interpreter education", which fosters a more academic perspective towards developing students into practitioners for professional practice (Winston & Monikowski, 2013; Witter-Merithew & Johnson, 2005).

Beginning in 2012, the RID began requiring all candidates for certification to have completed a four-year degree prior to being allowed to sit the performance component of the certification exam. This was an important move towards validating the need for a higher standard for interpreters entering the field, however, the requirement was for any four-year degree, and not a discipline-specific degree. While this has led to some students pursuing a four-year degree in interpretation, others instead chose to complete a four-year degree in an area unrelated to ASL-English interpreting (Winston & Monikowski, 2013).

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In January 2018, RID's website listed 49 certificate (less than a two-year degree) programs, 76 associate (two-year) degree programs, 43 bachelor's (four-year) degree programs, and four graduate-level programs. However, some of the interpreter education programs listed are actually programs in related fields such as ASL or Deaf Studies, minors, or concentrations[2] in interpreting (Boegner Godfrey, 2010). This demonstrates the lack of standardization in interpreter education.

While multiple colleges and universities offer interpreter education to meet the high demand for ASL-English interpreters, there are students graduating and obtaining employment without certification. In some cases, students complete the necessary coursework to earn their degree and sit for the certification test under RID, without successfully passing the required national certification exam. In other cases, graduates meet the state-legislated requirements, but are not actually able to effectively manage the complex language and information processing skills required in interpreting. These students face interpreting demands that they are ill-prepared to meet (Witter-Merithew & Johnson, 2005). In 1979, Carol Yoken, then editor of *the Journal of Rehabilitation of the Deaf*, challenged the field to "move from associate or bachelors level programs to masters and doctoral level programs" (Ball, 2013, p. 141). Yoken (in Ball, 2013) outlined a plan to improve interpreter education which included encouraging interpreter educators to work together to establish program outcomes and a curricular design that aimed to enhance students' ability to successfully enter the profession upon graduation. She also encouraged research that would compare student outcomes of interpreter education programs at the two-year, four-year and graduate levels in order to determine the most appropriate duration of interpreter education.

1.2. The gap

There is a well-documented gap between the point in time interpreting students graduate and the point at which they gain national interpreter certification. Winston (2005), Cokely (2005), and Witter-Merithew & Johnson (2005) have consistently noted how all stakeholders are impacted by students graduating from programs who are not able to provide competent interpreting services, as evidenced by their inability to obtain interpreter certification. In other words, there is a gap between students' ability to graduate and their ability to obtain national certification, meaning they often begin interpreting without national certification. Smith (in Witter-Merithew & Johnson, 2005), identifies how this gap does a disservice to the D/deaf community because the average graduate from an interpreter education program does not pass certification exams. This gap between graduation and earning interpreter certification in the US causes graduates to start taking on interpreting assignments before they are ready with the baseline skills set out by the RID. This means, in essence, that they learn on the job, while D/deaf people miss out on essential information and are therefore often misrepresented (Witter-Merithew & Johnson, 2005).

It is important to note that the gap differs depending on whether a student has graduated from a two-year program or a four-year program. Boegner Godfrey's (2010) study identified that the majority of graduates from four-year (bachelor) degree programs will obtain state-level credentials upon graduation in states that offer state certification, but that these same students may take up to one-year to earn national credentials. In contrast, graduates from two-year (associate) degree programs will typically require two additional years to obtain state-level certification and often more than that to earn national certification (Boegner Godfrey, 2010).

It could be that two-year interpreter education curricula may be rushing language development because in these programs interpreting courses are typically aligned with intermediate ASL courses (e.g. ASL III). There is evidence that ASL competence and ASL-English interpreting skills cannot be achieved in two years (Roy, 2000). Interpreting students themselves have "expressed concern about how all the skills could be acquired and mastered within a two-year associate degree" (Witter-Merithew & Johnson, 2005, p. 51). Unfortunately, the 2009 Interpreter Education Program Needs Assessment (Cokely & Winston, 2010) identified a higher number of

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[2] A concentration (sometimes also referred to as 'an emphasis') is a structured program of study within a major. Some university programs in the US allow for a student to select from a prescribed list of courses that provide an additional structured focus in a related subject. Alternatively, some programs allow students to create an emphasis by self-selecting courses that are of interest to a future career goal. These typically consist of 4 to 6 courses, but there is great variability. A program additional concentration or emphasis is not sufficient to learn ASL English interpreting as it is even less education than a two-year discipline-specific program.

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students enrolled in associate level programs (1037 students) compared with those enrolled in bachelor level programs (379 students). This could be based on availability, as there are more associate-level programs available nation-wide, while cost of tuition is less at a two-year community college versus a university. It may also be that some students are not willing to commit to more than two years to training.

The gap between the outcomes of interpreter education and certified, competent practice is reiterated by publications and presentations (Ball, 2013; Boegner Godfrey, 2010; Cokely, 2005; Hunt & Nicodemus, 2014; Volk, 2014; Winston, 2005; Witter-Merithew & Johnson, 2004, 2005). However, educators have failed to close the gap (Witter-Merithew & Johnson, 2005). Research findings indicate that one consistent recommendation in closing this gap would be the clear articulation of expected outcomes based on levels of academic study completed. At least two initiatives have been undertaken to articulate expected outcomes in the US. One comprised the accreditation standards of the Commission on Collegiate Interpreter Education. The other is a publication born of a grant-funded gathering of leading ASL-English interpreting education scholars from across the US who met to discuss this issue, which resulted in the publication of 34 entry-to-practice competencies that the group identified as requisite to entering the profession (Witter-Merithew & Johnson, 2005). While there is a published list of accredited interpreter education programs in the US, it is unclear how many programs have adopted competency-based program outcomes, or to what level the aforementioned competencies might have been applied to the curriculum design of two-year and four-year programs. In the US, neither the professional organization of interpreter educators nor the national certifying body for interpreters has delineated the difference in educational standards or outcomes for graduates from two-year and four-year degrees. There is an optional accreditation available to interpreter education programs in the US through the Commission on Collegiate Interpreter Education (CCIE). As of January 2018, the accrediting body lists five two-year (associate) programs, and thirteen four-year (bachelors) programs as having been accredited. However, no specific criteria for the different levels of accreditation are listed, nor is there any statement regarding an expectation of increased rigor for higher levels of academic study.

Several professions in the US, such as those related to healthcare, law, and education, have a system for identifying various levels of preparation and expertise. These are typically identified with labels that correspond to the amount of education completed along with certifications and/or licensure. Typically, those with a certificate or two-year degree are categorized as paraprofessionals, those with four-year degrees as generalist professionals, and those with graduate degrees as specialist professionals (Witter-Merithew & Johnson, 2005). In these practice professions where there are various levels of degrees and certifications, the certifying body identifies expected competency-based outcomes depending on the degree earned (Ball, 2013; Schumacher & Risco, 2017). Competency-based curriculum and educational approaches in nursing, have resulted in increased learner-centred education which promotes clear student and instructor understanding of expectations for performance, and this has in turn led to program success (Schumacher & Risco, 2017).

Despite the continued discussion about the gap between interpreting program graduation and certification readiness, little progress has been made in the US toward implementation of the recommendations to reduce the gap or ultimately, eliminate it. In 2005, Witter-Merithew and Johnson issued this challenge to the field: "It is time we set ourselves a deadline, and begin working on the infrastructures. We all own the gap" (p.15). Nearly ten years later, Volk (2014) presented a national call to action among interpreter educators to address this very same issue. In 2017, a national grant-funded project through the University of St. Catherine in St. Paul, Minnesota began working on the goal to further research strategies for closing this gap, specifically for students who hold a four-year degree. The study conducted in this article aims to inform the field by providing the first set of quantifiable data in the US which compares the expressive ASL competency of different groups of students.

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2.   Method

2.1. Theoretical framework

The foundation for assessing applicant language skills is based on Social Interactionist theory which emphasizes the learners' regular use and application of a second language as the best source for effective acquisition and eventually fluency in that language (Vygotsky, 1980). This framework provides insight into understanding the process of second language acquisition and has informed the development and administration of the language assessment that is required of applicants to the ASL-English interpreting program at the University of Northern Colorado (UNC). Applicants complete, as part of a larger admission process, an assessment of their fluency in using ASL as a second or other language. The results of this assessment have provided the data for this research project. These entry placement results were compared and analyzed based on prior education of applicants: completion of either a two-year interpreting degree or completion of only four semesters of ASL coursework (ASL I-IV).

2.2. Participants

The researchers identified 330 participants who were applicants wishing to enter UNC's ASLEI program during an eight-year span (2009 – 2017). For this purpose, the researchers wanted to identify applicants who had either graduated from a two-year interpreting program (including a minimum of ASL I-IV courses and interpreting courses) and applicants who had completed only ASL I-IV coursework from a college or university.

Applicants were excluded from the study if they had **not** completed a) ASL I-IV post-secondary coursework or the four semesters of ASL coursework (four classes, each ranging from 3-5 credits), or b) a two-year, associate-level degree in interpreting. This eliminated applicants who took ASL in high school, had acquired ASL through life experience or employment, or acquired ASL through other sources. A total of 250 applicants met the selection criteria for the two groups. Applicants came from across the US, ranging in age from 18-55, including a breadth of cultures and identities, involving both applicants who had no experience in the field and current practitioners who had yet to obtain national credentials. Applicants with a two-year degree had graduated from 24 different institutes of higher education. Applicants from 133 different colleges and universities had applied to transfer to UNC after completing ASL I-IV.

Applicants' identities were kept strictly confidential, and all identifiers were removed to analyze potential correlations in findings without bias. Additional information listed about the applicants included academic background (completing a two-year degree or only having taken ASL language courses), state, transfer institution, and the results of the three areas of the DOC (receptive, expressive, and knowledge of ASL grammar and Deaf Culture). For the purpose of this article, only the data from the ASL expressive component were analyzed. The transferring institution and states of residence will not be reported on here.

2.3. Instrument

The ASLEI program requires applicants wishing to pursue a bachelor's degree in ASL-English Interpretation at UNC, to complete a pre-screening assessment, consisting of an application with a written essay, the ASL DOC, and an intake interview. The data from the DOC constitute one factor used to determine applicants' readiness and entry placement in the ASLEI program.

The DOC is a proprietary pre-screening system scheduled and administered by the ASLEI program. The DOC screening was developed by a nationally recognized D/deaf ASL assessment expert in 2007 and began to be implemented in the ASLEI program later that same year. In the eight years examined for this study, the DOC has maintained the exact same format, knowledge questions, ASL receptive scenarios, and ASL expressive instructions. There are two versions of source material for the DOC so that students who re-take the screening are presented with new questions and new texts.

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All applicants are given a week to complete the online DOC. They are encouraged to complete the expressive screening first since those are sent out to external raters. The expressive screening consists of four sets of instructions to elicit the standard ASL features that compose the 20 to 30-minute recorded language sample. By being allowed a week to complete the requirements, applicants can practice and polish their language sample in order to submit their best effort. This avoids a situation where preparation time taken differs and acts as a confounding variable when comparing results.

2.3.1   DOC assessment rubric

The validity of the DOC is evidenced by the standard rubric used by the team of expert D/deaf raters (see below). The rubric used includes standard grammatical and linguistic features such as maintaining ASL grammatical structure, incorporating use of space and classifiers, accurate ASL sign production, fluency in fingerspelling and numbers, and fluidity of overall language production. Based on the rubric, the ratings were aligned with an ASL course level based on language competence. Applicants receiving a recommendation of ASL I-IV placement demonstrated less than the minimum required for program entry. Applicants receiving an ASL V rating demonstrated the minimum language competence for entry into this four-year program. Applicants recommended for ASL VI or higher are viewed as having advanced ASL skills, appropriate for entry into a program that offers them another three years of interpreter education until graduation. These applicants will undergo an additional screening by an ASLEI faculty member to confirm advanced placement. UNC's ASLEI curriculum provides two-years of ASL in the lower division courses (year one and two of the four-year degree program), specifically ASL V-IX, prior to commencing two-years of consecutive and simultaneous interpreting coursework in the upper-division work (year three and four of the four-year degree program).

2.3.2   Expert raters

The ASL expressive language sample submitted by each applicant is reviewed by a team of two to five external raters who hold a minimum of a graduate degree. They act as raters on other national ASL assessments and are instructors of ASL at post-secondary institutions across the US. The number of raters for a given DOC is based on availability, and not on potential ability of the applicants. Multiple raters are used to ensure inter-rater reliability.

A minimum of two raters independently review the applicants' language sample. If ratings and recommendations are widely different between the two raters, an additional assessment will be done by one more rater, followed by a discussion regarding the rating if necessary. The raters are not provided applicants' full names or contact information; however, a limitation is that students may introduce themselves in their video and/or raters may recognize them. Raters are required to follow University standards regarding the US Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and UNC contracts require additional documented agreements. There was no requirement for raters to provide consent to participate in the study reported on here, since the research only looked at the outcomes of ratings.

One dependent variable of this study was the applicants' placement into ASL or interpreting coursework based on the expressive ASL competencies revealed during the DOC screening and placement recommendation of the raters.

2.4.   Procedure

The ASLEI Program stored the DOC results on a secure server within the Department of ASL and Interpreting Studies at UNC for the purpose of academic advisement. After receiving approval from the UNC Institutional Review Board (IRB), the researchers began creating a master list, dividing applicants into two categories: applicants who had graduated from a two-year interpreter education program and applicants who had completed only ASL I-IV coursework prior to application. The ASL expressive screening ratings were compared between these two groups.

For the purpose of this study, all applicants were assigned numbers (1-330) in order to avoid identification by third parties. In addition to this assigned number, the year the applicant took the DOC was listed. The study compared applicants' academic backgrounds, specifically if they had taken ASL I-IV coursework or a two-year

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interpreting degree with ASL coursework incorporated into the curriculum, and compared that information to their ASL expressive screening results. The ASL expressive screening scores were compared between applicants from these two groups, identifying the number of applicants that screened into one of these four groups:

1. Remedial ASL: This means an applicant was assessed as eligible for entry into ASL I-IV, or foundational ASL coursework, and was not ready for ASLEI program entry.

2. Minimum language competence for program entry (ASL V): This means an applicant was assessed as eligible for entry into ASL V, which is the first class in the first year of the ASLEI program.

3. Advanced ASL (ASL VI or higher): This means an applicant was assessed as eligible for entry into ASL VI or higher. These courses are taken in the latter part of year 1 or in year 2 of the ASLEI program.

4. Interpreting: This means the applicant was assessed as eligible for entry into year 3 of the ASLEI program, and was considered to have near-native like ASL competence.

3. Data analysis

Descriptive analysis was used to compare the percentages of applicants in the two groups and their expressive ASL competence ratings. A chi-square was used to perform the analysis on the scores between the groups.

The second research question inquired as to whether or not a two-year degree in interpreting transferred into a four-year degree in interpreting with junior (third year) level expressive skills. Many of the various colleges and degree programs offering the two-year associate degree stated in their course catalogues and on their websites that graduates of their two-year programs could complete a four-year discipline specific degree in ASL-English interpreting within two additional years. A descriptive statistics approach was used, as this research question focused on applicants who had completed two-year interpreting degrees and the question as to whether they achieved junior (third year) level expressive skills on the DOC or not. At UNC, this level of scoring allows for direct entry into interpreting coursework, with ASL I-IX competence reflected in the DOC ratings.

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive Statistics and Chi-square Test

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Chi-square Test

Screening Results			
Applicant Groups	Screened into ASL I-IV	Screened into ASL V	Screened into ASL VI+	Screened into Interpreting**
Two-year degree (n=53)	13 (25%)	23 (43%)	17 (32%)	0 (0%)**
ASL I-IV only (n=197)	84 (43%)	79 (40%)	34 (17%)	0 (0%)**

Note: **The fourth column (Screened into Interpreting) was not used in the chi-square analysis because the frequency in the cells were zero.
$\chi2 = 8.13^*$, df = 2. Numbers in parentheses indicate row percentages adding up to a total of 100%.
*p < .05, Cramer's V= 0.18.

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4.2. How do applicants with a two-year degree in ASL-English interpretation compare to those with only ASL coursework in regard to expressive ASL competence?

Chi-square results demonstrated statistical significance (Table 1). The ratings of applicants who had completed a two-year degree in interpreting were different to the ratings of those who had completed only ASL I-V coursework. For applicants screening into ASL V (which is year one at UNC) there was a 3% difference. For applicants screening into ASL VI and higher (which is year two at UNC) there was a 15% difference. The effect size was calculated using a Cramer's V, equalling 0.18. This effect size demonstrates there was a minimal difference between the two applicant groups.

Based on this data (Table 1), and considering only applicants who had been assessed as being ready for program entry (ASL V, ASL VI+, or interpreting rating on the DOC) we found that:

- Applicants with a two-year degree in interpreting were admitted into ASL V at a rate of only 3% more than applicants with only ASL I-IV coursework, demonstrating the minimum language competence to enter the program in the first year of study, with four years until graduation.

- Applicants with a two-year degree in interpreting did perform better, since 32% screened into ASL VI or higher, demonstrating greater than minimum language competence, with expected graduation in three years. Finally, 15% more of applicants with a two-year degree scored ready to enter ASL VI+ compared to applicants who had only completed ASL I-IV coursework (17%).

Overall, completing a two-year degree in interpreting resulted in an 18% greater success rate in terms of program entry into year one or two at UNC's four-year interpreting degree than did completion of ASL I-IV courses only.

4.3. Do applicants with a two-year degree in interpreting transfer with expressive skills suitable for entry to year three of a four-year interpreter education program?

None of the applicants who had completed a two-year interpreting program demonstrated expressive readiness to enter year three of ASLEI. Students who are in year three in the ASLEI degree program have completed the necessary ASL I-IX coursework and are beginning interpreting courses. It is expected and projected by many two-year interpreting program course catalogs that graduates of these 24 two-year interpreting programs will enter year three of interpreting coursework in a four-year interpreting degree program. The results of this study demonstrate that in reality less than half of applicants with a two-year degree screened ready for ASL V (43% in Table 1). In other words, out of the 53 applicants with a two-year degree, 23 were eligible for progression into year one of a four-year degree (ASL V). At UNC, this means that these applicants have demonstrated the minimal language expressive competence to enter year one courses (ASL V), and that no applicants were assessed as ready for year three coursework.

5. Discussion

It is a logical assumption of applicants who have completed a two-year degree program that they will be assessed as ready for the necessary year three coursework in a four-year interpreting program, in order to graduate within two years. Also, it could be reasonably expected that applicants who have completed ASL I-IV should screen ready for ASL V, considering appropriate learning progression. However, the findings of this study demonstrate that there was only a minimal difference between the expressive ASL competence of applicants who took a two-year degree in interpreting compared to applicants who had completed only ASL I-IV coursework. Further, none of the applicants who had completed a two-year degree screened ready for junior-level interpreting coursework at UNC.

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The majority (75%) of applicants in the study who had completed a two-year degree in interpreting demonstrated expressive competence to enter UNC's ASLEI program at either year one (ASL V) or year two (ASL VI+) of the four-year degree program. It is important to note that a significant number of applicants (43%) with a two-year degree in interpreting, demonstrated only the minimum language competence for program entry into the first semester of year one (ASL V), and would need to complete four more years to earn their bachelor's degree from UNC. This is only 3% more than those who had completed only ASL I-IV coursework.

It is significant that 32% of applicants with a two-year degree in interpreting demonstrated ASL competence for program entry at the level of ASL VI or higher, entering year two of ASLEI. Remarkably, 17% of applicants with only ASL I-IV coursework achieved entry into ASL VI or higher. Further research could examine specific curricula to determine any patterns in screening results among graduates from specific institutions.

It is important to recognize the trend that most two-year interpreter education programs have academic schedules and curricula that typically require students to work on ASL language development at the same time as being required to develop new interpreting skills. *The results of this study show that the difference between these groups is so statistically minimal that interpreter educators everywhere should question the validity and effectiveness of two-year programs for students who are not already fluent in the two languages in which they plan to work* (italics ours, for added emphasis).

Further, reviewing a range of institutional course catalogs specific to the applicants who had earned a two-year degree, showed a trend where two-year programs inform their students that they can expect to be ready for year three interpreting coursework at an institution offering a four-year degree. Catalogs from two-year interpreting degree programs claim that these two-year interpreting program graduates are effectively prepared for entry-level interpreting work, and that they can confidently approach the national certification tests. The data from this study align with findings of earlier research (Boegner Godfrey, 2010; Witter-Merithew & Johnson, 2005) indicating that graduates from two-year interpreting degrees are in fact most unlikely to achieve such outcomes and that such claims should therefore arguably be removed from the relevant course catalogs.

Careful assessment regarding academic programming should be taken as more two-year programs in the US create agreements whereby students graduating with a two-year degree in interpreting transfer to a partnered university to earn a four-year (bachelor's) degree in another two years - especially since these partnered programs often do not include further training in interpreting, but simply provide the general education credits needed for a four-year degree. According to Volk (2014), partnership without further training in interpreting perpetuates the false idea that less education in the area of interpreting is acceptable. Where such partnerships do offer additional interpreter education, they frequently lack scope and sequence for scaffolded learning and/or require the transfer student to step back and retake some portions of their completed two-year degree program of study (L. Johnson, personal communication, February, 2018). Boegner Godfrey (2010) suggests the restructuring of two-year programs to offer degrees in foundational ASL, without interpreting. Students would then be provided with the necessary language competence and could potentially transfer into a four-year interpreting program at the third-year level because of their established language competence.

The data from this study, which shows that students completing a two-year program are only minimally more skilled in producing ASL than those who have only taken four semesters of ASL (ASL I-IV), reinforces the notion that a two-year degree in interpreting is not enough to adequately prepare its graduates for professional practice or certification.

Certifying bodies should give serious consideration to these findings, which suggest that the minimum requirement to apply for a certification exam should be a discipline-specific four-year degree. This standard would align with other human services professions in fields such as healthcare, education, and others. In addition, accrediting bodies should re-examine accreditation for four-year interpreting programs and two-year interpreting programs, as the outcomes of such programs appear to vary.

The book *Toward Competent Practice: Conversations with Stakeholders* (Witter-Merithew & Johnson, 2005) identified the collective agreement about the minimum skills a graduate must possess upon completion based on 34 entry-to-practice competencies. However, the discipline needs to integrate these competencies into the curricula of four-year interpreter education programs and then establish exit-level assessments based on these standards through, for example, a portfolio process (Witter-Merithew & Johnson, 2004). As Witter-Merithew & Johnson pointed out: "By creating a comprehensive curriculum designed to guide learners into mastery of all the competencies, the field can determine what can be [effectively] achieved" by way of standardized interpreter education (2005, p. 119).

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6.   Limitations and further research

This study was limited to the applicants to UNC's ASLEI program and only looked at expressive ASL skills. Further research is needed to compare other outcomes of two-year interpreter education programs across the US and internationally. A further limitation of this study is that curricula from the various institutions that the students came from were not available for review. Therefore, it is not possible to identify similarities or differences in curricula that may have impacted these results. This study also does not include longitudinal data regarding any potential link between ASL expressive skills upon program entry and post-graduation certification. Further research is needed to compare the outcomes of graduates of two-year and four-year programs. Such studies are still needed in order to determine the most appropriate duration of education for future interpreters. In addition, leaders in ASL instruction might consider further research in what Boegner Godfrey (2010) refers to as explicit information related to facilitation of student mastery of requisite ASL knowledge and skills. It could be helpful to examine ASL programs in high school, where young people may take up to four years of ASL. Development of ASL programs in high schools may lead to greater applicant readiness for a four-year degree in interpreting, whilst also employing more D/deaf language experts as teachers of ASL in primary and secondary settings. This partnership between interpreter education and qualified community members relates directly to our history in interpreter education. Cokely (2005) challenges programs to look back at the history of interpreter education in the US when the Deaf community served as 'gatekeepers' of interpreters entering the field. This would encourage programs in the US to substantially include members of the D/deaf community in the education of interpreters throughout their course of study. As Cokely (2005) pointed out, this requires that programs demand a great level of research informed education and that educators question practices that are not supported by research.

7.   Conclusion

While the ideas that led to this research have been expressed by a number of interpreter educators in a variety of forums and publications over the last forty years, this is the first quantitative study that provides educators with insight into the outcomes of two-year interpreting programs. It is the only study that demonstrates a statistically significant result showing that there is little difference in ASL expressive competence between those who graduate from a two-year degree in ASL-English interpreting or those who have completed four semesters of ASL. This information is provided with the goal of contributing quantifiable data needed for the field of interpreter education in the US to progress. The results of this study demonstrate the need for a coordinated effort where ASL and interpreter education, accreditation, and certifying bodies move toward establishing the minimum requirement of a four-year degree in interpretation for ASL-English interpreters.

Acknowledgments

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