

From Novice to Legal Interpreter
Pathways, Competencies and Preparation for ASL-English Legal Interpreting

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Abstract

In this research, I examine legal settings in ASL–English interpreting, focusing on the competencies and preparation needed to work effectively in legal and courtroom environments. Because legal interpreting carries high-stakes consequences, this research considers the pathways ASL–English interpreters take as they prepare for legal interpreting work. Data were collected through an anonymous questionnaire distributed through online professional networks. The findings indicate that formal training, mentorship, and real-world practice serve as foundational pillars of legal interpreter preparation. Together, these three pillars support interpreter readiness and competence by providing distinct but connected pathways toward specialized legal interpreting work.

Keywords: Legal interpreting, ASL/English interpreting, certification, legal settings, specialized training

Chapter 1: Introduction

Background of the Study

The inspiration for this study stems from conversations with d/Deaf and hard of hearing individuals, as well as colleagues in the field of ASL–English interpreting, who have witnessed—either personally or through others—the serious consequences of legal decisions influenced by inadequate interpretation. These conversations revealed the real and often irreversible impact that interpreting can have in legal contexts, where accuracy, clarity, and cultural and linguistic competence are critical. When interpreters lack a strong understanding of legal concepts, procedures, or discourse; misinterpretations can occur. In legal settings, even small errors can have significant consequences, including misunderstandings of rights, misrepresentation of testimony, or unjust legal outcomes for d/Deaf and hard of hearing individuals.

The weight of this responsibility contributes to a broader issue within the interpreting field. Many interpreters recognize the high stakes of legal work and, as a result, choose to avoid legal settings altogether. This avoidance is often not due to a lack of interest, but rather a lack of confidence, preparation, or access to clear pathways for entering this specialized area (Roberson et al., 2012). At the same time, d/Deaf and hard of hearing individuals continue to encounter legal systems and require qualified interpreters to ensure equitable access. The demand for legal interpreting services remains constant, regardless of whether interpreters feel prepared to meet it.

This imbalance has contributed to a shortage of certified and qualified legal interpreters, particularly because the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) no longer awards the Specialist Certificate: Legal (SC:L) or the Conditional Legal Interpreting Permit–Relay

(CLIP-R) to new candidates (Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf [RID], 2026). Those who are working in legal settings often face increased pressure, high expectations, and demanding workloads. Research on sign language interpreting has connected occupational demands, stress, and limited decision latitude to burnout and other work-related concerns (Schwenke, 2015). Within legal interpreting, these concerns may be intensified by the high-stakes nature of the work, the complexity of legal settings, and the pressure to maintain accuracy under demanding conditions. As a result, interpreter well-being and the overall quality of services may be affected. At the same time, the lack of a clearly defined and accessible pathway into legal interpreting further complicates this issue, as legal interpreting requires specialized competencies, training, and ongoing professional development beyond general interpreting preparation (Roberson et al., 2012). This uncertainty reinforces the need to examine how interpreters actually describe their preparation, training experiences, and pathways into legal work.

Statement of the Problem

These concerns also inform my own interest in this study. My academic and professional background in ASL–English interpreting and legal studies has shaped my interest in legal interpreting preparation. I hold an Associate of Arts in American Sign Language, an Associate of Science in Paralegal Studies, a Bachelor of Arts in Sign Language Interpreting, and a Master of Arts in Interpreting Studies. My interpreting experience includes K–12 and postsecondary education, healthcare, religious, entertainment, sports, federal and local government, and quasi-legal settings. This background informs my interest in legal interpreting preparation while also positioning me as a developing practitioner seeking to better understand pathways into this specialized area of the field.

Existing literature identifies the complexity of legal interpreting and emphasizes the need for specialized training, ethical awareness, advanced language skills, and knowledge of legal discourse (Hale, 2004; Roberson et al., 2012). However, less research has examined how interpreters themselves describe their preparation for legal settings. In particular, there is a gap in understanding the lived experiences of interpreters as they navigate formal training programs, mentorship opportunities, and real-world practice. To address this gap, I focus on the preparation pathways of interpreters who are currently working, or have previously worked, in legal and court-related environments.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to identify and clarify the pathways that ASL–English interpreters take to become prepared for legal interpreting. Participants include both hearing interpreters and Deaf interpreters working within ASL–English legal interpreting contexts. Specifically, I examine the roles of formal training, mentorship, and professional experience in developing the competencies necessary for legal work. Through interpreters’ narratives, I identify common patterns, challenges, and influential learning experiences that contribute to readiness in legal settings.

In addition to contributing to the research literature, the findings may have practical implications for interpreter education and professional development. By identifying common preparation pathways, required competencies, and participant-recommended resources, I aim to clarify how interpreters can be better supported in pursuing legal interpreting work. Ultimately, the findings may support more informed and effective preparation practices for interpreters working in legal settings.

Theoretical Basis

The theoretical basis for this study are Situated Learning Theory and Deliberate Practice Theory. Situated Learning Theory frames learning as a process that occurs through participation in authentic social and professional contexts, including mentorship, observation, and communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Deliberate Practice Theory supports the understanding that competence develops through structured, purposeful practice, feedback, reflection, and gradual refinement over time (Ericsson, 2006). Together, these theories provide a foundation for examining how interpreters develop readiness for legal interpreting through formal training, mentorship, professional experience, and ongoing skill development.

Definition of Terms

The following terms are defined to clarify how key concepts are used throughout this study. These definitions provide a shared foundation for understanding the terminology, credentials, and practice contexts related to ASL–English legal interpreting.

ASL–English interpreters. For the purposes of this study, “ASL–English interpreters” refers broadly to interpreters working within ASL–English interpreting contexts, including hearing interpreters and Deaf interpreters who participate in interpreting teams.

Certified Deaf Interpreter (CDI). A Certified Deaf Interpreter is a Deaf interpreter who has specialized training and certification to provide interpreting services, often working as part of an interpreting team to support linguistic and cultural access.

Conditional Legal Interpreting Permit–Relay (CLIP-R). The Conditional Legal Interpreting Permit–Relay was a credentialing pathway for Deaf and hard-of-hearing interpreters working in legal settings. This credential is no longer awarded to new candidates.

Competence. Competence refers to the ability to apply knowledge, skills, judgment, and professional dispositions effectively within a specific context.

Legal interpreting. Legal interpreting refers to interpreting that occurs in legal, court-related, law enforcement, attorney-client, or legal-adjacent settings where legal rights, responsibilities, procedures, or consequences may be involved.

The Specialist Certificate (SC:L): Legal was a credential previously awarded by the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) to interpreters who demonstrated specialized knowledge and competence in legal interpreting. This credential is no longer awarded to new candidates.

Preparation Pathway Terms

Formal training. In this study, formal training refers to structured educational experiences related to interpreting or legal interpreting, including coursework, workshops, legal interpreting instruction, certification-related preparation, and organized professional development activities.

Mentorship. In this study, mentorship refers to guidance, feedback, observation, and professional modeling provided by more experienced interpreters or practitioners. Mentorship may include formal mentoring relationships, informal consultation, teaming, and opportunities to learn from experienced legal interpreters.

Real-world practice. In this study, real-world practice refers to applying interpreting knowledge and skills in authentic, simulated, or supervised professional contexts. This may include courtroom observation, mock legal interpreting scenarios, supervised interpreting practice, team interpreting, and gradual exposure to legal or court-related assignments.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Professional competence in ASL–English interpreting is shaped by formal training, mentorship, experiential learning, and ongoing professional development, particularly in specialized contexts such as legal interpreting. Within legal settings, where accuracy, ethical judgment, procedural knowledge, and role boundaries are critical, the development of interpreter competence becomes especially important. This literature review examines scholarship related to interpreting competence, legal interpreting demands, interpreter education, mentorship, experiential learning, and professional development. Together, these areas provide the foundation for understanding how interpreters develop readiness for legal interpreting work and how preparation pathways may support or limit entry into this specialized field.

Interpreting Competence

Competence is understood as the ability to meet complex demands through the integration of knowledge, skills, and dispositions within specific contexts; (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2005) or as “the quality or state of having sufficient knowledge, judgment, skill, or strength” for a particular duty or purpose (Merriam-Webster, para. 2). Formal education, as defined by Manuti et al. (2015), is a “type of learning [that] happens in contexts specifically designed for education and is characterized by intentionality and planned learning activities, usually delivered through training and development programs within organizations” (Laubengaier et al., 2025, p. 33). Formal training is necessary for developing legal interpreting competence because legal settings require specialized knowledge

of legal terminology, legal systems, courtroom protocol, ethical decision-making, and effective collaboration (NCIEC, 2012; RID, 2026).

Secondly, mentorship contributes to the readiness of trainees in becoming professional practitioners. From academia to the corporate world, research consistently demonstrates that mentorship is a significant driver of career development, retention, and professional growth (Allen et al., 2004). This aligns with Situated Learning Theory, which emphasizes learning through guided participation, observation, and involvement in professional communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Mentees develop professional skills, workplace behaviors, and decision-making strategies by watching and engaging with more experienced practitioners.

Relatedly, real-world practice contributes to practitioner readiness and competence by enhancing knowledge, providing hands-on practice, and refining and supporting ongoing skill development necessary for effective professional performance (Desimone, 2009). This is particularly important for practitioners seeking to specialize within their field. For ASL–English interpreters in legal settings, professional development may encompass advanced training in legal discourse, courtroom procedures, ethical decision-making under high-stakes conditions, and supervised practice within legal interpreting environments.

Altogether, the three pillars of formal training, mentorship, and real-world practice work together to support interpreter readiness and competence in legal environments. Together, they help practitioners develop the knowledge, skill, professional judgment, and applied experience needed to perform accurately and ethically in high-stakes legal settings.

Core Theoretical Frameworks

This study is grounded in Situated Learning Theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and Deliberate Practice Theory (Ericsson, 2006), which together support an understanding of

competence as something developed through authentic participation, guided experience, structured practice, feedback, and ongoing refinement.

Situated Learning Theory emphasizes that learning occurs through participation in authentic social and professional contexts. Rather than viewing knowledge acquisition as an individual activity, Situated Learning Theory frames learning as a social process that develops through guided participation, observation, mentorship, and involvement in communities of practice. This framework is especially relevant to ASL–English legal interpreting because interpreters often develop readiness through real-world exposure, collaboration with experienced practitioners, courtroom observation, team interpreting, and gradual participation in legal settings.

Situated Learning Theory is closely aligned with sociocultural understandings of learning, particularly Vygotsky's (1978) emphasis on social interaction and scaffolding. Vygotsky argued that learners develop through mediated experiences and guidance from more knowledgeable individuals, allowing them to perform tasks they may not yet be able to accomplish independently. This idea supports the role of mentorship in interpreter development, particularly when novice or developing interpreters learn from experienced legal interpreters through observation, feedback, and professional guidance. It also supports the importance of real-world practice, as novice interpreters develop competence by participating in authentic professional contexts where they can observe legal discourse, understand role expectations, and gradually apply interpreting skills in supervised or legal-adjacent settings.

Deliberate Practice Theory further supports this study by explaining how competence develops through structured, purposeful, and feedback-driven practice. Ericsson (2006) argues that expertise is not acquired through experience alone, but through focused practice designed

to improve specific aspects of performance. This framework is relevant to legal interpreting because legal readiness requires more than exposure to legal settings; it requires formal training, targeted skill development, feedback, reflection, and repeated refinement over time. In this study, deliberate practice helps explain how interpreters strengthen legal interpreting competence through intentional preparation rather than experience alone.

Together, Situated Learning Theory and Deliberate Practice Theory support the central argument that competence in legal interpreting develops through formal training, mentorship, and real-world practice. Formal training provides foundational knowledge of legal systems, terminology, ethics, and role expectations. Mentorship offers professional guidance, feedback, and modeling from experienced interpreters. Real-world practice allows interpreters to apply developing skills in authentic or supervised legal contexts. Collectively, these three pillars help explain how interpreters move from general interpreting competence toward readiness for specialized legal work.

Legal Context & Systems

Legal interpreting occurs within a highly structured and procedurally complex system characterized by formalized language, adversarial interactions, and strict evidentiary requirements (Berk-Seligson, 2002; Hale, 2004). Within this system, interpreters operate across a range of settings, including courtroom proceedings, law enforcement encounters, and attorney-client communications (González et al., 2012). Each of these settings has distinct communicative demands. The role of the interpreter requires accuracy, impartiality, and careful attention to the legal consequences of interpreted discourse, as interpreted language may influence how testimony, evidence, and participant credibility are understood within legal proceedings (Berk-Seligson, 2002). These conditions create a uniquely demanding environment

in which interpreting competence must be highly developed to ensure accurate and reliable communication within legal processes.

Defining Legal Interpreting

Legal interpreting occurs across a variety of contexts, encompassing a wide range of settings and responsibilities within the broader legal system, each with distinct communicative and procedural demands. This requires interpreters to navigate both formal courtroom proceedings and other legally significant interactions. As defined by the National Association of Judiciary Interpreters and Translators (NAJIT), “Legal interpreting is divided into two main categories: judicial (commonly referred to as court interpreting) and quasi-judicial (interpreting that occurs in other legal settings). Judiciary interpreters work in courtrooms as well as in out-of-court settings related to legal matters or cases” (2016, para. 2). Practitioners in this field are referred to as judiciary interpreters, denoted by NAJIT (2016) as “highly skilled professionals who fulfill an essential role in the administration of justice by providing complete, unbiased, and accurate interpretation between English speakers and non-English or limited-English-proficient (LEP) defendants, litigants, victims, or witnesses” (para. 2). Such interpreters are impartial officers of the court serving to remove linguistic barriers, providing complete and equal access to justice under the law. Similarly, the National Consortium of Interpreter Education Centers (NCIEC, 2016) defines legal settings broadly to include law enforcement investigations, interviews and interrogations, attorney–client interactions, and a wide range of court and legal proceedings.

Definitions from both NAJIT and NCIEC emphasize the broad scope of legal interpreting, encompassing a wide range of settings and responsibilities. The categories of legal interpreting contexts identified by NAJIT are summarized in the chart below.

Table 1*Table 1 Categories of Legal Interpreting Contexts*

Legal Proceedings	Quasi-Legal Settings (outside the courtroom)	Other Justice Services (or for court support personnel)
Initial appearances	Attorney-client interviews	Probation officers
Bail applications	Prosecutor and victim or witness interviews	Medical personnel conducting psychiatric evaluations
Pretrial conferences	Proffer sessions with prosecutors	Law enforcement personnel conducting polygraph examinations
Pleas	Grand Jury proceedings	Probation and parole interviews
Evidentiary hearings	Law enforcement interviews and interrogations	Administrative hearings
Trials		Depositions
Sentencings		Immigration hearings
Post-sentencing hearings		Worker's compensation hearings

As illustrated in Table 1, legal interpreting encompasses a wide range of contexts, each shaped by distinct communicative and institutional demands. Within these environments, legal interpreting has been described as a specialized form of language mediation influenced by the

discourse practices and power structures of the legal system (Hale, 2004). Furthermore, research has demonstrated that interpreter-mediated discourse can influence the perception and interpretation of testimony within legal proceedings (Berk-Seligson, 2002).

Legal System Context

To further understand the variability in how legal interpreting is defined and practiced, it is important to consider the legal system in which these interpretations occur. The United States legal system operates within formal procedures, defined participant roles, evidentiary standards, and a strong emphasis on accuracy and the official record. Legal settings often involve specialized terminology, structured discourse, and high-stakes consequences for the individuals involved. Because interpreted communication may become part of the legal record, interpreter-mediated discourse can influence how testimony, credibility, and meaning are understood within legal proceedings (Berk-Seligson, 2002; Hale, 2004). Within this context, interpreters play a crucial role in ensuring accurate communication across languages and supporting meaningful access to the legal process.

Interpreter Roles in Legal Settings

Within legal settings, interpreters have a highly defined and ethically regulated role centered on ensuring accurate, complete, and impartial communication between parties who do not share a common language. In accordance with professional standards, interpreters are expected to function as neutral language mediators whose primary responsibility is to render all spoken or signed messages faithfully without addition, omission, or alteration (RID, 2005). However, the interpreter's role may shift depending on the specific legal context in which they are working. In courtroom settings, interpreters often operate under strict procedural constraints as officers of the court, while in law enforcement or attorney–client interactions, they may

engage in more dynamic and rapid discourse with varying interactional demands. Across these environments, interpreters must continuously balance accuracy, neutrality, and real-time adaptability within high-stakes communicative settings. This creates a role that is both highly constrained and cognitively demanding.

Legal Interpreting Demands

Legal interpreting occurs within an environment characterized by high linguistic, cognitive, and procedural demands. Interpreters must process complex and often rapid discourse in real time, frequently involving specialized legal terminology, formal register shifts, and adversarial interactional dynamics.

Pöchhacker (2004) frames interpreting as a cognitively demanding activity shaped by specialized legal terminology, formal register shifts, and adversarial interactional dynamics. Relatedly, Hale (2004) emphasizes that interpreting is also structurally constrained, as legal language is closely tied to power, credibility, and legal outcomes. As a result, interpreters are not only required to manage specialized vocabulary, but also to navigate complex discourse rules and institutional constraints that shape meaning within legal proceedings.

In addition to linguistic accuracy, interpreters are required to maintain strict neutrality while managing emotionally charged content, multiple speakers, and unpredictable turn-taking structures. These conditions are further intensified by the fact that interpreted utterances become part of the official legal record, where even minor inaccuracies may carry significant consequences (Berk-Seligson, 2002). Interpreting is not merely the transfer of linguistic content but a dynamic process of meaning-making within institutional discourse (Wadensjö, 1998). This perspective highlights the interactional complexity of interpreting in legal settings.

Standards & Certifications

Legal interpreting is governed by established professional standards and certification systems designed to ensure interpreter competence, ethical conduct, and consistency in practice. In the United States, the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) establishes ethical guidelines and performance expectations through its Code of Professional Conduct, which emphasizes accuracy, confidentiality, impartiality, and professional accountability (RID, 2005). While RID previously offered specialized legal credentials, including the Specialist Certificate: Legal (SC:L), which assessed specialized competence for interpreters working in legal settings, and the Conditional Legal Interpreting Permit–Relay (CLIP-R), which was designed for Deaf and hard-of-hearing legal interpreters, both credentials are currently in moratorium and are no longer awarded to new candidates. The Board for Evaluation of Interpreters (BEI) is a state-level certification system that evaluates the skill level of ASL interpreters. Although originally established in Texas, BEI certification has been used or recognized in several other states as an alternative or supplement to national certification pathways. The BEI also includes specialized certification categories, including court interpreter certification, which reflects the field’s recognition that legal interpreting requires additional assessment and preparation beyond general interpreting certification.

Although specialized RID legal credentials such as the SC:L and CLIP-R are not currently available, their existence reflects the profession’s historical recognition of legal interpreting as a specialized area of practice. Ongoing efforts to examine legal interpreting competencies further suggest continued attention to this area. Legal interpreting competence requires more than bilingual ability; it also involves specialized training, ethical reasoning,

legal knowledge, and the ability to perform under significant cognitive and institutional pressure.

Challenges in Legal Interpreting

Legal interpreting presents a range of interrelated challenges that stem from its linguistic, cognitive, and institutional complexity (Hale, 2004; Pöchhacker, 2004). One of the primary challenges is the need to accurately render highly specialized and often ambiguous legal language in real time, while maintaining fidelity to both meaning and register (Berk-Seligson, 2002). In addition, the emotionally charged nature of legal proceedings may add another layer of affective and ethical complexity for interpreters (Wadensjö, 1998). These conditions are further compounded by the expectation of interpreter neutrality, which requires constant self-monitoring while simultaneously engaging in complex linguistic and cognitive processing (RID, 2005). This highlights the inherently high-stakes nature of legal interpreting and underscore the necessity of advanced competence development to ensure accurate and reliable communication in legal contexts.

Consequences of Misinterpretation

Misinterpretation in legal settings can have significant and far-reaching consequences due to the high-stakes nature of legal discourse and the evidentiary status of interpreted communication. Because interpreter renditions become part of the official record, even subtle shifts in meaning, register, or tone may influence how testimony is perceived by judges, attorneys, and juries (Yi, 2023). Research has shown that interpreter-mediated discourse can affect assessments of credibility, intent, and emotional expression, potentially altering the perceived strength of testimony (Berk-Seligson, 2002; Hale, 2004). In adversarial legal contexts, such distortions may contribute to misunderstandings that impact legal strategy,

procedural outcomes, or case interpretation. Furthermore, inaccuracies or omissions may disproportionately affect linguistically marginalized d/Deaf or limited-English-proficient individuals, raising concerns about equity and due process within legal proceedings (Wadensjö, 1998). As a result, misinterpretation is not merely a linguistic error but a factor that can directly shape legal meaning and outcomes. These consequences underscore the critical importance of interpreter competence in legal settings, where linguistic decisions may directly shape legal interpretation and outcomes.

Training and Competency

Research on legal interpreting consistently highlights gaps in training and preparedness as key factors influencing interpreter competence and willingness to engage in legal work. Roberson et al. (2011) identify this issue directly in their study *American Sign Language/English Interpreting in Legal Settings: Current Practices in North America*, noting that “the main reason interpreters do not specialize in legal interpreting is a lack of understanding of the nature of the work and appropriate training” (p. 1). Similarly, interview data from practicing interpreters indicate that avoidance of legal specialization is frequently attributed to insufficient training, limited familiarity with legal discourse, and concern about the consequences of error (Roberson et al., 2011). These findings suggest that competence in legal interpreting is not developed through classroom knowledge or general interpreting experience alone, but through targeted preparation aligned with institutional expectations, legal discourse, and high-stakes decision-making. Similar to other legal professionals, interpreters must develop readiness through specialized training, mentorship, and applied experience within legal contexts. Without such preparation, interpreters may enter legal settings without sufficient awareness of role expectations, cognitive demands, or consequences of misinterpretation,

contributing to ongoing gaps in qualified practitioners. These findings reinforce the need for clearer, more structured preparation pathways for interpreters working in or entering legal settings.

Equity, Access and Power

Equity, access, and power are central concerns in legal interpreting, as interpreter-mediated communication directly shapes individuals' ability to participate in and understand legal proceedings. Research has shown that access to justice in legal settings is closely tied to the availability and quality of interpreting services (Berk-Seligson, 2002; Hale, 2004). This positions interpreters as key facilitators of procedural fairness and social inclusion. In *Access to Court Interpreting as Social Inclusion for Migrants in Australia*, Yi (2024) posits that interpreters function as gatekeepers of procedural justice, and that the act of interpreting itself serves as a mechanism of social inclusion. Accuracy is therefore of the utmost importance, as it directly affects the fairness of legal proceedings. Relatedly, Stern et al. (2022) highlight that interpreter-mediated communication has a direct impact on procedural justice, including whether participants are able to understand proceedings, communicate effectively, and perceive the process as fair. Within this context, interpreting is not only a linguistic service but also a mechanism through which access to justice is either enabled or constrained.

This dynamic becomes especially significant because legal discourse is closely tied to credibility, authority, and legal outcomes (Hale, 2004). Interpreter-mediated communication can influence how testimony is perceived, how meaning is constructed, and how legal decisions are shaped (Berk-Seligson, 2002). In this sense, the interpreter is not a passive conduit but an active participant in the justice process (Wadensjö, 1998).

Gaps in Literature

Despite a growing body of research on legal interpreting, several gaps remain, particularly in relation to ASL/English interpreting and competency development within legal contexts. While existing research has addressed the cognitive demands of interpreting (Gile, 2009), the discourse structures of legal settings (Hale, 2004), and the interactional nature of interpreter-mediated communication (Wadensjö, 1998), there is limited synthesis of these frameworks in relation to ASL/English legal interpreting contexts.

Additionally, general models of interpreting competence may not fully account for the unique linguistic, interactional, and structural dynamics of ASL–English interpreting in legal environments (Roberson et al., 2011; Roberson et al., 2012). Studies such as those by Smith (2016) and Roberson et al. (2011) further highlight inconsistencies in how legal interpreting is defined by practitioners themselves, as well as ongoing uncertainty regarding training pathways and specialization requirements. These inconsistencies suggest a lack of clarity in how legal interpreting competence is developed, assessed and supported within the profession.

Although applied resources and training materials exist, they often remain uneven in focus, with limited ASL-specific guidance for legal contexts. This reinforces the need for research that connects interpreting competence, legal discourse, and preparation pathways more directly.

Applied and Foundational Resources

In response to these gaps in the literature, several key resources of applied and foundational resources continue to inform interpreter preparation and professional competency development. Mikkelsen (2015), in *Introduction to Court Interpreting*, provides a foundational overview of courtroom interpreting, addressing key areas such as the interpreter's role in

judicial settings, ethical principles, interpreting techniques, and strategies for managing the cognitive flow of information in legal contexts. This text remains a widely used reference in interpreter education. In addition, the National Association of the Deaf provides informational guidance on laws affecting accessibility and legal rights through its overview of *Lawyers and Legal Services*, which outlines legal protections and rights relevant to Deaf individuals. This resource highlights the importance of understanding legal protections that impact Deaf individuals' access to interpreting services.

Complementing these perspectives, *Deaf People in the Criminal Justice System* (Guthmann et al., 2021), published by Gallaudet University Press, centers the experiences of Deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals within legal environments. The work of Guthmann et al. addresses issues such as linguistic access, attorney–interpreter–client dynamics, and systemic barriers within the justice system. This emphasizes the importance of incorporating Deaf perspectives into discussions of legal interpreting practice and competence development.

Additional resources addressing best practices and required competencies in legal interpreting specifically for ASL/English interpreting is sometimes limited. *Interpreters in Federal and New York State Courts: Recommended Best Practices* (New York State-Federal Judicial Council, 2015) outlines procedural expectations and best practices for both interpreters and legal professionals across a range of judicial processes. This resource provides deeper insight into court procedures and professional roles. However, the resource does not specifically address ASL/English interpreting which highlights a gap in the literature regarding the linguistic and cultural dimensions of signed language interpreting within legal contexts.

Similarly, Project CLIMB (Cultivating Legal Interpreters from Minority Backgrounds) offers a valuable contribution to training and professional development literature. This five-year

grant initiative aimed to “increase the number of interpreters of color...through the creation of career paths for specialization in legal interpreting for practitioners from these underrepresented communities” (Project CLIMB, 2021, para. 1). Although the program is no longer active, its curriculum materials remain publicly available as open-source training resources. The continued accessibility of these materials highlights their ongoing relevance for interpreter education and specialization pathways in legal interpreting.

Taken together, these resources show that while foundational and applied materials exist, the literature remains uneven in its attention to ASL–English legal interpreting, interpreter readiness, and the development of legal interpreting competence. In particular, there is limited research connecting legal discourse, Deaf-centered access, mentorship, real-world practice, and competency development within a single preparation framework. These gaps support the need for the present study, which examines how ASL–English interpreters describe the training, mentorship, experiences, and readiness factors that shape their preparation for legal interpreting work.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

This study is informed by a grounded theory–inspired approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2006), which emphasizes the development of conceptual understanding through systematic analysis of recurring patterns within the data. Rather than testing a predetermined hypothesis, grounded theory allows for categories and themes to emerge inductively from the literature and selected resources on legal interpreting. This approach is particularly useful in examining how legal interpreting is defined, understood, and operationalized across different sources, including practitioner perspectives, institutional guidelines, and academic frameworks. Through comparison of these materials, the study identifies recurring themes related to interpreter competence, training pathways, and conceptualizations of legal interpreting. Together, this contributes to a more integrated understanding of the field.

In addition to this document-based analysis, I use a qualitative approach to explore interpreter preparation pathways through the analysis of professional narratives. The purpose of this research is to better understand the training, mentorship, and professional experiences that contribute to interpreter readiness and competence in legal environments. By analyzing interpreters' experiences, I identify recurring patterns and meaningful learning processes that inform professional development in the field. This narrative data is analyzed using the same grounded theory–informed, coding process, allowing themes to emerge.

Research Design

This study follows a qualitative, narrative-based survey design administered through Google Forms. The survey was structured into eight sections and included a total of 16 questions combining multiple-choice, select-all-that-apply, and open-ended response formats. I designed

the instrument to gather information about interpreters' professional experiences, definitions of legal interpreting, training pathways, and perceptions of competency within legal and court interpreting contexts.

The first section served as an introductory page, including IRB-approved study information, consent details, and contact information for the researcher. Section two consisted of an informed consent agreement; participants who selected "yes" were directed to the survey, while those who selected "no" exited the form. Section three gathered background demographic and professional information, including years of interpreting experience, current interpreting settings, and whether participants currently accept legal interpreting assignments.

Section four focused on professional experience, asking participants to define legal interpreting in their own words and describe the types of legal assignments they most frequently interpret. Section five examined qualifications and professional pathways, including how participants entered legal interpreting work, training and mentorship experiences, certifications held, and how agencies determine qualification in the absence of legal-specific certification. Section six explored competency development by asking participants to identify essential skills and knowledge for legal interpreting and reflect on what they wish they had known prior to entering the field. Section seven invited participants to provide guidance for novice interpreters interested in legal work, and section eight asked participants to recommend resources that have supported their development in legal interpreting practice.

A total of 114 ASL–English interpreters participated in the study, including Deaf, hearing, retired, currently working, and non-working interpreters. Email collection was disabled in Google Forms to ensure anonymity; therefore, no identifying information was collected or linked to responses. Although participants were recruited through professional networks and

RID-affiliated contact lists, all responses remained fully anonymous and untraceable to individual participants.

Data Sources and Participants

The target population for this study includes professional ASL–English interpreters with experience in legal or court-related settings, including courtrooms, attorney–client meetings, depositions, and other legal or quasi-legal environments. Participants included Deaf, hearing, retired, currently working, and non-working interpreters with varying levels of professional experience and training backgrounds.

Participants were recruited through professional networks and RID-affiliated contact lists, as well as social media platforms such as LinkedIn and interpreting-specific online groups. A purposive sampling strategy was used to intentionally recruit individuals with experience relevant to legal interpreting practice.

A total of 114 interpreters participated in the study. Participation was voluntary, and all responses were collected through an anonymous Google Forms survey. Email collection was disabled, and no identifying information was collected, ensuring that responses could not be traced back to individual participants. At the time of analysis, responses reflected a diverse range of professional experiences, educational pathways, and levels of engagement with legal interpreting work.

Data Analysis Procedures

Data analysis was conducted using a qualitative thematic analysis approach informed by grounded theory principles. This included open coding, repeated review of participant responses, constant comparison across responses, and the development of themes from the data rather than from predetermined categories (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Charmaz, 2014).

Next, I systematically coded responses by identifying recurring words, phrases, and concepts related to interpreter training, mentorship, professional experience, and preparation for legal interpreting work. These initial codes were compared across responses using a constant comparative method in order to identify similarities and differences within the data.

I then organized codes into broader thematic categories that reflected patterns across participants' experiences, including mentorship and guidance, formal training and workshops, and experiential or on-the-job learning. These themes were refined through iterative review to ensure they accurately represented the dataset as a whole.

Finally, I interpreted the resulting themes in relation to the research questions and existing literature on interpreter preparation, competence development, and legal interpreting practice.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

To support trustworthiness and rigor, I used several strategies throughout the analysis process. Credibility was supported through repeated review of survey responses and the use of direct participant quotations to keep findings grounded in the data. Dependability was addressed through a systematic process of coding, categorization, and theme development. To reduce personal bias, I connected my interpretations directly to participant responses and used direct quotations to support the themes identified in the data. I also provided background information about participants' interpreting experience, work settings, certification status, and involvement in legal interpreting so readers could understand the context of the findings.

Ethical Considerations

I considered ethical issues throughout the design and implementation of this study. Prior to participation, all respondents were provided with an informed consent page outlining the

purpose of the study, voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any time before submitting responses. Participants were required to indicate consent before proceeding to the survey.

To protect confidentiality, the survey was administered through Google Forms with email collection disabled. No identifying information was collected, and responses could not be linked to individual participants. Although participants were recruited through professional networks and RID-affiliated contact lists, no access was retained to individual email responses or identifying details.

Data were stored in a password-protected Google account and were accessible only to the researcher. Because email collection was disabled and no identifying information was requested, the dataset did not contain names, email addresses, or other direct identifiers. Data were used only for the purposes of reviewing responses, identifying themes, and reporting findings for this thesis. Given the professional nature of the participant population, care was taken to avoid including any information that could indirectly identify individuals or organizations. All findings are presented in aggregate form to further protect participant anonymity.

Summary

This methodology section outlines the qualitative approach used to explore how ASL–English interpreters prepare for legal and court interpreting work. By using an anonymous online questionnaire and thematic analysis of narrative responses, this study prioritizes participants’ lived experiences and professional insights. The chosen research design, sampling strategy, and data analysis procedures support the study’s goal of identifying meaningful pathways to interpreter competence and informing future training and mentorship practices within the field of ASL–English legal interpreting.

Chapter 4: Results

This chapter presents the findings of the study, organized according to the research questions and key thematic areas that emerged from the data. Results include both quantitative summaries of participant demographics and qualitative analysis of participants' responses regarding their experiences, preparation pathways, and perspectives on legal interpreting. Descriptive statistics are used to provide context for the participant sample, followed by thematic analysis of open-ended responses.

Participant Demographics

This section provides an overview of participant demographics to contextualize the findings. Demographic questions gathered information about participants' years of interpreting experience, current work settings, involvement in legal interpreting, and certification status. These questions provided background information about the participant sample and were not analyzed as major themes on their own.

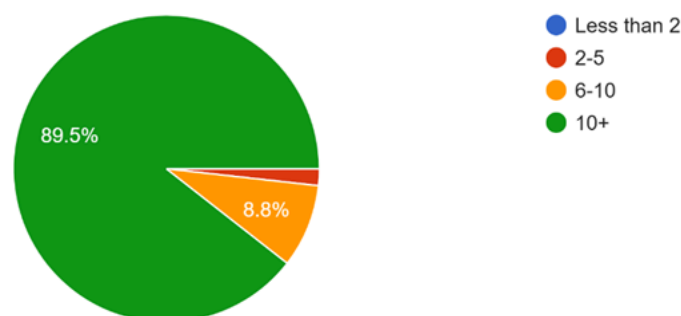
Participants were asked to report the number of years they had worked as ASL–English interpreters. For the purposes of this study, years of experience refers to participants' self-reported time actively working as interpreters, rather than years certified or years since completing an interpreter education program. As illustrated in Figure 1, the sample reflects a range of experience levels, with both novice and highly experienced interpreters contributing to the perspectives represented in the data.

Figure 1

Years of Experience as an ASL–English Interpreter

How many years have you worked as an ASL–English interpreter?

114 responses



Note. Years of experience reflects participants’ self-reported time actively working as ASL–English interpreters. This measure does not indicate years certified or years since completion of an interpreter education program.

Conceptualizations of Legal Settings

To further explore how participants conceptualize legal interpreting, it is important to consider both how they define legal settings and the types of assignments they associate with this work. Participants’ responses reflected not only definitions of what constitutes a legal setting, but also the practical contexts in which they most frequently engage in legal interpreting assignments. Together, these responses highlight how legal interpreting is understood in both theory and practice.

Definitions of Legal Settings and Reported Legal Work Contexts

Participants defined “legal settings” in a variety of ways, with responses overwhelmingly centered on court-related interpreting as the dominant setting. Court-related assignments included criminal, civil, family, immigration, juvenile, traffic, and dependency proceedings, as

well as specialized contexts such as competency evaluations, hearings, depositions, and jury-related interpreting.

Beyond courtroom environments, participants also described assignments in law enforcement and correctional settings, including police interviews, arrests, jail and prison interpreting, probation visits, parole hearings, and interactions in maximum security facilities. These responses show that participants understood legal interpreting as extending beyond formal courtroom spaces and into broader justice system processes.

A smaller but notable portion of participants described legal-adjacent or quasi-legal settings, including immigration processes (e.g., USCIS, DHS, ICE and immigration court), child protective services (CPS/DFYS), victim services, court-ordered treatment, and social service-related legal interventions. Participants also referenced interpreting in medical-legal contexts, such as psychiatric evaluations, competency assessments, advanced directives, and mental health evaluations, where legal status or decision-making capacity was central.

Additional responses included administrative and civil, legal documentation contexts, such as banking, real estate transactions, insurance claims, estate planning, and legal paperwork signing. In this non-traditional sense, one participant reported “I do not interpret legal assignments typically, but I do interpret in settings such as medical and other settings that you could be legally liable for information” (Participant 89). This response illustrates how some participants extend the concept of “legal” interpreting beyond formal court settings to include other contexts where information may carry legal liability. Some participants also reported occasional interpreting in educational contexts, such as Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings where legal implications are present, as well as interactions between police officers and students.

Overall, findings indicate that legal interpreting assignments are highly expansive and extend beyond traditional courtroom settings into law enforcement, correctional systems, administrative proceedings, education and civil/legal-medical crossover contexts. Virtual assignments were also noted by several participants, reflecting increased remote interpreting in legal contexts. Table 2 summarizes how participants defined legal settings.

Table 2

Examples of Legal and Legal-Adjacent Settings Identified by Participants

Category	Subcategory	Examples
Courtroom / Judicial Settings	Criminal	Trials, arraignments, hearings, plea agreements, drug cases
	Civil	Civil actions, landlord-tenant, administrative cases
	Family	Divorce, custody, parenting, DV, orders of protection
	Juvenile	Dependency actions, juvenile delinquency
	Immigration Court	Immigration hearings, deportation proceedings
	General Court Proceedings	Depositions, status conferences, bench trials, jury (incl. Deaf jurors)
Law Enforcement / Corrections	Police Interaction	Police interviews, arrests
	Custodial Settings	Jail, prison, maximum security facilities
	Supervision	Probation visits, parole hearings
Immigration & Government Systems	Federal Agencies	USCIS, DHS, ICE
	Interviews & Proceedings	Citizenship interviews, immigration processes
Social Services / Legal Systems	Child Welfare	CPS, DFYS, custody-related services
	Community Services	Victim services, crisis interventions, court-ordered programs
Medical-Legal / Psychological	Evaluations	Psychiatric evaluations, competency determinations
	Legal Medical Decisions	Advanced directives, medical POA
	Mental Health	Therapy for incarcerated individuals, psych assessments
Civil / Administrative Contexts	Financial & Property	Banking, real estate, insurance claims
	Legal Documentation	Contract signing, estate planning, legal paperwork
	Professional Services	Business/legal consultations
Other / Cross-Context Work	Legal Meetings	Attorney-client meetings, intake, consultations
	Education-Related	IEPs, school-based legal interactions
	Modality	Virtual legal assignments

Note. Table 2 presents examples of legal and legal-adjacent settings described by participants. It is not intended to represent the percentage of participants who reported each setting.

Entry Pathways and Preparation for Legal Interpreting

Participants described diverse pathways into legal interpreting, including both structured and informal routes into the field.

Pathways into Legal Interpreting

Participants described a variety of pathways into legal interpreting, with most entering the field through a combination of training, mentorship, and situational opportunity. Participant responses included examples of formal preparation such as legal interpreting workshops, certificate trainings, specialized initiatives including Legal Interpreting Training Institute (LITI) and Project CLIMB, and certification-related preparation through BEI Court or NIC pathways. One participant described their preparation as developing “after several years of attending legal workshops, observing and working with seasoned interpreters in a variety of legal settings” (Participant 97). This response reflects the role of sustained exposure, mentorship, and real-world practice in interpreter development.

Certification structures also appeared in participant responses as one factor shaping perceptions of readiness for legal interpreting. One participant referenced historical eligibility requirements tied to RID legal credentialing:

My understanding is that when RID offered a legal credential, one had to have attained general certification five years prior in order to sit for the legal exam. Even though that requirement no longer exists, I plan to wait until I have been certified for five years before considering taking on legal work. In the meantime, I will continue to take workshops, seek mentorship with those working in the legal field, and attend public hearings to increase my knowledge of legal settings. (Participant 5)

This response highlights a deliberate and gradual approach to building readiness for legal interpreting assignments through formal training, mentorship, and real-world exposure.

Participants implied the potentiality of multiple pathways into legal interpreting, including intentional preparation and a more gradual approach. This is reflected across multiple responses, with participants noting: “I started by taking an intensive week-long training, shadowing experienced peers and starting with lower risk situations” (Participant 84), “Over ten years ago I was working as a community interpreter when an agency asked me to cover an assignment with the police department, then another, and another” (Participant 29), and “I started by working with a Deaf attorney in civil matters, then [started] taking on-call days at a large courthouse” (Participant 63).

Together, these responses highlight the central role of mentorship and supervised exposure in developing readiness for legal interpreting assignments. A notable theme in participants’ entry pathways into legal interpreting was entry driven by community need, systemic shortages, or perceived responsibility to the Deaf community. Participants described entering legal work in contexts where qualified interpreters were limited or unavailable, particularly in rural or underserved areas. Participants also described being recruited or encouraged by colleagues or mentors to take on legal assignments, often with additional training or supervised support. The data also included accounts of ethical or community responsibility influencing participants’ decisions to engage in legal interpreting, particularly in response to political or systemic demands within the field. Participants described this experience in terms of limited qualified options, professional encouragement, and community responsibility. One participant explained that “no other qualified options were available” (Participant 58), while another stated, “a colleague and mentor encouraged me to and helped me get proper training and

experience” (Participant 7). Another participant described feeling compelled by “the current political environment” to become available to members of the Deaf community (Participant 96).

Overall, pathways into legal interpreting were rarely linear, instead reflecting a combination of personal initiative, external encouragement, and evolving professional opportunities. Table 3 illustrates this concept below.

Table 3

Pathways of Entry into Legal Interpreting

Pathway Category	Description	Example Data
Formal Preparation	Structured training, certifications, and coursework	LITI (90); Project CLIMB; BEI Court; SCL; workshops
Mentorship & Experiential Learning	Shadowing, supervision, and learning through practice	50-hour mentorship; working with experienced interpreters; observations
Gradual Entry	Incremental involvement in legal settings over time	Started in traffic court; progressed from CPS/police to court
Opportunity & Demand	Entry driven by external need or requests	“No other qualified options were available” (58); agency/court requests

Personal Initiative	Self-directed interest and pursuit of legal work	Studied for exams; sought out training; accepted initial assignments
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These findings lead to a closer examination of training, mentorship, and community of practice in interpreter development for legal settings.

Training, Mentorship, and Community of Practice

Preparation for legal interpreting was described as developing through multiple pathways, including formal training, mentorship, community-based learning, and self-directed study. Within these pathways, formal training appeared as a distinct theme. Participants identified structured legal interpreting workshops, CEUs, certificate trainings, and specialized programs such as Project CLIMB, CSUN legal training, Carla Mathers trainings, TerpAcademy, AQI legal training in Florida, Signs of Development's SC:L written prep course, and mock trial experiences. Participants described these opportunities as important for developing legal knowledge, understanding courtroom procedures, and strengthening interpreting-specific competencies within legal settings.

Mentorship and engagement within a broader community of practice came up as a central part of preparation across participants. Rather than relying only on formal programs, participants often described learning through relationships and hands-on experience, including shadowing, teaming with more experienced interpreters, and seeking guidance from seasoned practitioners. This also included observing court proceedings firsthand, with participants noting time spent sitting in court to watch how experienced interpreters worked in real time. Participant 24 stated, "One of the most valuable [methods of preparation] is just sitting in courtrooms and observing the system, asking questions of legal professionals (not [just] interpreters)."

Some participants described more informal or self-directed preparation, including independent study of legal texts, self-teaching of legal terminology, and experiential learning through prior work in Deaf community contexts or accessibility-related roles. Participant 100 described this type of nontraditional preparation pathway, stating, “I am an old school interpreter who did not attend any program of study. All of my skills were acquired through socialization with the Deaf community and ongoing continuing education opportunities through workshops and trainings that I have attended on my own.”

Overall, this ongoing exchange of knowledge, through observation, consultation, and collaborative work in legal settings, was described as key to building confidence and professional judgment in legal interpreting. Table 4 summarizes participants’ reported training, mentorship, and preparatory experiences for legal interpreting.

Table 4

Training, Mentorship, and Preparatory Experiences for Legal Interpreting

Category	Description	Examples
Formal Legal Training	Structured coursework, CEUs, and organized training programs	CLIMB, CSUN Legal Training, Carla Mathers, TerpAcademy, mock trials, NECIC trainings
Mentorship & Community of Practice	Learning through experienced interpreters, teaming, and professional networks	Shadowing, veteran mentorship, teaming, RID Legal Member Section, community of practice

Academic & Legal	Formal education in	Law school coursework, paralegal
Field Exposure	law-related fields or exposure to legal systems	programs, criminal justice degrees, auditing legal classes
Informal & Self-Directed Learning	Independent study and experiential learning outside formal programs	Self-study, legal books, Deaf community learning, ADA background

Determining “Qualification” in Practice

Participants described significant inconsistency in how courts and agencies determine interpreter qualifications in the absence of a formal legal certification. While some jurisdictions maintain structured processes, such as required certifications, state registries, court-specific exams, or formal vetting procedures, participant responses also described qualification decisions as informal, inconsistent, or minimally enforced. Participant 73 stated, “Many don’t actually check.” Participant 7 expanded on this concern, explaining, “In my state...the courts do a very poor job of this and it’s terrifying, if [I] may be candid. They are vastly unaware of varying skill levels, best practices, specialty settings, etc.” Similarly, Participant 103 reflects on their experience:

How do [courts determine interpreter qualifications] and how should they; are two different questions. They SHOULD start with CDIs with SC:L and then [certified interpreters] who have had proper training only. Courts typically don't screen at all and agencies sometimes throw whoever is available. Sometimes courts even use bailiffs who just know how to fingerspell. It's a scary situation....

Participant responses indicated that in more structured systems, interpreters must meet specific requirements such as holding national or state-recognized credentials, completing legal training, passing court-related examinations, or being listed on an approved registry. In some cases, interpreters were required to submit documentation of training, mentorship, or letters of recommendation to demonstrate readiness for legal work.

However, a dominant theme across responses was the reliance on informal or subjective methods of determining qualification. Participant responses indicated that courts and agencies may depend on self-reported experience, word-of-mouth recommendations, or interpreter availability rather than standardized criteria. Responses also described interpreters being “sworn in” or qualified on a case-by-case basis by judges, as well as systems in which agencies send available interpreters with limited or no verification of legal competence. Participant 19 explained, “Sometimes, they just want a warm body.”

Participants also pointed out gaps in how courts and agencies understand interpreting credentials and the demands of legal interpreting. These gaps are further complicated by variation across national and regional legal systems—some having strict laws, while others have very little oversight. As a result, responsibility often shifts onto interpreters to assess their own readiness and determine whether they are prepared to accept legal work.

Competencies

Building on participants’ preparation experiences, this section focuses on the competencies needed for legal interpreting, including both the skills and knowledge participants identified as essential, as well as areas where they felt unprepared early in their careers.

Essential Skills and Knowledge Areas

Participants identified a wide range of skills and knowledge areas essential for working in legal settings. Responses consistently emphasized the importance of legal knowledge, including familiarity with legal terminology, court procedures, and the broader structure of the legal system. In addition to content knowledge, participants highlighted the need for strong interpreting skills, including accuracy, clarity of production, and proficiency across interpreting modes such as consecutive and simultaneous interpreting.

Ethical awareness and understanding of the interpreter's role also emerged as a major theme, with participants overall emphasizing the importance of maintaining boundaries, correcting the record, and recognizing their responsibilities as officers of the court. Participants also described interpersonal and interactional skills as important to legal interpreting work, including the ability to work effectively with judges, attorneys, and interpreting teams, as well as the ability to navigate high-pressure environments with confidence.

Cultural competence and client-centered awareness were also emphasized, particularly in relation to understanding the diversity of the Deaf community, assessing client comprehension, and advocating for the use of Deaf interpreters when appropriate. Finally, participants highlighted the importance of cognitive and reflective skills, including critical thinking, decision-making, and the ability to remain calm and adaptable in complex legal situations.

Legal Knowledge and Systems Understanding

Participants emphasized the importance of having a strong understanding of legal terminology, court procedures, and the structure of the legal system. This included familiarity with concepts such as Miranda rights, distinctions between civil and criminal law, and the

progression of cases through the court system. Several participants also noted the importance of understanding the roles of legal professionals and how procedures may vary across jurisdictions. “The American legal system, protocol on how to correct the interpretation for the record, legal terminology” (Participant 8). This reflects the need for interpreters to develop both content knowledge and procedural awareness in order to function effectively in legal settings.

Interpreting Skills and Linguistic Competence

Participants emphasized the importance of strong linguistic competence and advanced interpreting skills for working in legal settings. This included fluency across working languages, the ability to adapt interpretations based on context and audience, and maintaining accuracy while navigating complex legal discourse.

One participant highlighted the level of linguistic flexibility required, noting, “Native or native-near fluency in the languages and cultures of the interpretation, ability to modulate the interpretation between formal equivalency, dynamic equivalency, and Skopos that fits the [client’s] competence...” (Participant 81). This reflects the need for interpreters to not only be highly proficient in both languages, but also able to adjust their interpreting approach based on the linguistic and cognitive needs of the client.

Participants also emphasized that interpreting competence extends beyond language skills. As one participant noted, “[The] knowledge and skills [required] are quite extensive. Every aspect of the US Legal system needs to be studied and interpreters need to have a working knowledge of the system”. (Participant 17). This highlights how linguistic skill is closely connected to broader knowledge and contextual understanding in legal settings.

Participants also discussed the depth of linguistic knowledge required when working with legal terminology. For example, Participant 95 stated, “[A] basic understanding of Latin is

helpful.” This example illustrates how specialized linguistic knowledge may support the accurate interpretation of legal concepts. Overall, participants emphasized the importance of both linguistic precision and adaptive interpreting strategies in legal interpreting work.

Ethical Judgment and Professional Role

Participants emphasized the importance of ethical awareness and a clear understanding of the interpreter’s professional role in legal settings. This included knowledge of legal protocol, role boundaries, and the interpreter’s responsibility, as an officer of the court, to maintain the integrity of the record. One participant highlighted the importance of understanding role boundaries and responsibilities noting it is important to have “an understanding of: legal protocol, the restrictions of legal interpreters (we cannot be advocates), and most importantly, how to stop and let the Judiciary know if we are not meeting the linguistic needs of the client” (Participant 70). This reflects the need for interpreters to actively monitor communication and intervene when necessary to ensure accessibility.

Participants also emphasized the importance of maintaining clear boundaries and working effectively within interpreting teams. As one participant explained, it is essential to know, “how the boundaries and role of the interpreter are different from working in other settings... trust to know that the record will be corrected as needed, and the confidence to not become defensive in teaming” (Participant 88). This highlights the collaborative and high-stakes nature of legal interpreting, where professionalism and teamwork are essential.

In addition, ethical competence was closely tied to an understanding of scope of practice and potential legal consequences. One participant noted the necessity for deep awareness of “interpreter limitations, scope of practice. How to avoid conflicts of interest or creating a situation where evidence/reports may be inadmissible. How to halt proceedings if accessibility is

compromised in any way” (Participant 34). This shows the importance of recognizing when to act in order to protect the integrity of the process.

Finally, participants pointed to the need for professional judgment and confidence in navigating complex situations. One participant described the importance of, “Discernment and a willingness to assert communication needs with respect and authority. Willingness to seek help, advice or consultation when needed. Understanding of standards of practice” (Participant 94). This reflects the expectation that interpreters follow ethical guidelines and also apply them thoughtfully in real-time legal contexts.

Overall, these responses emphasize that ethical competence in legal interpreting extends beyond rote rule-following to include self-awareness, discernment, accountability, and the ability to act decisively in complex, high-pressure environments.

Interactional and Interpersonal Skills

Participants emphasized the importance of interactional and interpersonal skills when working in legal settings. This included the ability to communicate effectively with judges, attorneys, and other court personnel, as well as maintaining composure and confidence in high-pressure environments.

One participant underscored the connection between language use and interactional effectiveness, noting, “You may know all the legal terms and procedures but if you can’t code switch effectively, you will not be able to meet the linguistic needs of the consumer... causing testimonies to be inaccurate or even worse having someone wrongfully convicted” (Participant 93). This highlights how linguistic flexibility directly impacts communication outcomes in legal contexts.

Participants also pointed to the importance of confidence and comfort in navigating professional interactions. As one participant stated, “Strong communication skills for when talking with attorneys and judges... anxious and timid aren’t a good fit for legal settings” (Participant 18), emphasizing the need for interpreters to engage assertively in these environments.

In addition, responses highlighted the role of perception, emotional awareness, and professionalism. One participant described the need for “keen linguistic and body language perception, nuance recognition... maturity, [and] suspension of one’s ego to keep the focus on the court participants” (Participant 72). This reflects the importance of maintaining focus, neutrality, and awareness of subtle communicative cues.

Finally, participants noted that these skills are often developed through experience rather than formal training. As one participant explained, “Interpreters need experience... life experience, interpreting experience, soft skills to navigate often difficult situations” (Participant 112). Similarly, another participant emphasized that “court interpreters aren’t trained. They are experienced practitioners of the profession before walking into a courtroom” (Participant 93). This suggests that interactional competence is built over time and is closely tied to both professional and personal development.

Overall, these responses highlight that effective legal interpreting requires not only technical skill, but also the ability to navigate complex interpersonal dynamics with confidence, awareness, and professionalism.

Cultural and Client-Centered Competence

Participants emphasized the importance of cultural awareness and a client-centered approach when working in legal settings, particularly in relation to ensuring meaningful access

for Deaf individuals. This included recognizing factors such as language deprivation, fund of information gaps, and varying levels of linguistic and cognitive access.

One participant highlighted the importance of assessing client participation, noting the need to consider “competency issues regarding Deaf persons’ ability for participation” as well as challenges that may affect the interpreting team (Participant 68). This reflects the responsibility interpreters have in recognizing when communication may not be fully accessible.

Participants also pointed to the broader systemic and social factors that influence legal interpreting. As one participant explained, an understanding of “power, privilege and oppression, [and] current events” is essential (Participant 47), highlighting how legal interpreting does not occur in isolation, but is shaped by larger societal dynamics.

In addition, several responses emphasized the importance of advocating for appropriate accommodations. One participant noted the need for “being able to explain to advocates and other judicial members why CDIs or other special accommodations are needed, [and] identifying language deprivation and fund of information gaps” (Participant 56). This emphasizes the interpreter’s role in supporting equitable access within the legal process.

Finally, participants highlighted the importance of professionalism and adaptability in working with diverse individuals in legal contexts. As one participant described, this includes the ability to “remain calm under pressure, [be] respectful to the authorities and appropriately kind to all participants” (Participant 12). This reflects the need to balance professionalism with responsiveness to the needs of all parties involved.

Overall, these responses highlight that cultural and client-centered competence is essential for ensuring equitable and effective communication in legal interpreting, particularly in contexts where access, power, and language intersect. While participants identified a wide range

of competencies necessary for legal interpreting, many also reflected on areas where they felt underprepared, particularly early in their careers. The following section explores these gaps in preparation and the insights participants shared based on their early experiences in legal settings.

Preparation Gaps and Early-Career Insights

Many participants wished they had been more familiar with courtroom procedures, legal terminology, and expectations surrounding interpreter conduct before entering legal settings. This included understanding where to stand, how to address the judge, how to correct the record, and how to manage the pace of court proceedings. One participant reflected, “I wish I had more understanding of the basics: where do I go? Where do I stand? What do I say or not say?” (Participant 83). Another noted the importance of learning “how to go at the speed of court... and be bold enough to ask for a pause” (Participant 111).

Participants also emphasized the importance of mentorship, observation, and teaming support early in their development. Several respondents wished they had more opportunities to consult with experienced interpreters, observe courtroom proceedings, or work alongside Deaf interpreters and co-interpreters before independently accepting assignments. Fear and intimidation also emerged as recurring themes. While some participants described feeling overwhelmed early on, others reflected that legal interpreting was “not as scary” as they initially believed once they developed confidence and experience. Participant 61 reflected, “It’s not actually as scary as I thought it was going to be with the stigma of needing to be certified to be in that space, but if you’re confident, competent and knowledgeable then you can do it” (Participant 61). Similarly, other participants wished they had known “not to be so scared” (Participant 37), that “it wasn’t as scary as I made it to be” (Participant 18), and that although “there are a lot more gray areas than it seems,” legal interpreting is often “not as scary as people

make it out to be” (Participant 35). Together, these responses suggest that fear was a common early barrier, but one that often lessened with preparation, experience, and increased confidence.

Finally, participants reflected on the unpredictable and complex nature of legal interpreting work. Responses highlighted the absence of a single “blueprint” for legal settings, the emotional demands of the work, and the importance of adaptability in rapidly changing environments. Participant 34 recounts “[C]ourt is chaos, and even though it is a process and goes by literal laws and rules, there is no blueprint to follow and every single time it will be different and unpredictable”.

Guidance for Novices

Participants offered guidance regarding how novice interpreters can prepare for legal work and develop readiness for this specialized area of practice. Responses emphasized gradual skill development, professional experience, and intentional preparation prior to entering legal settings.

Pathways Toward Qualification and Readiness

When describing steps novice interpreters should take before pursuing legal work, participants consistently emphasized the importance of first developing strong general interpreting skills and fluency across working languages, in this case English and American Sign Language. Many participants stressed that legal interpreting is not an entry-level speciality and should not be treated as such. Instead, interpreting in legal settings should be approached only after significant professional and personal development. The most common pathways to entry included obtaining certification, gaining several years of interpreting experience, observing legal settings (with and without interpreters present), participating in legal-specific workshops and training, and seeking mentorship from experienced legal interpreters.

A recurring theme across responses was the importance of experience prior to entering legal settings. Several participants explicitly recommended waiting multiple years before accepting legal assignments, with one participant stating to “wait 10 years” (Participant 83), while another recommended interpreters “work five + years” before pursuing legal work (Participant 49). One participant further emphasized the importance of both professional and life experience, recommending “minimum 10 years interpreting experience” and being “over the age of 30” noting that “life experience is a must for having scope and knowledge of interpersonal demands” (Participant 99).

Participants also strongly encouraged observation and mentorship as part of interpreter preparation. Recommendations included shadowing experienced legal interpreters, observing courtroom proceedings independently, and becoming familiar with courtroom culture, procedures, and communication dynamics before actively interpreting in those settings. As one participant explained, interpreters should

Go to court without interpreters. Just get the feel for the setting; how people act, where people sit, what seems acceptable, and what gets the judge hot under the collar. That takes a lot of the scariness out of it. (Participant 28)

Another participant echoed this sentiment, emphasizing the importance of paying attention to “the ways in which all the various people communicate” within legal environments (Participant 10).

Additionally, respondents stressed the importance of ongoing learning and intentional preparation. This included legal training, workshops, peer mentoring, and developing familiarity with legal systems and state-specific laws. Several responses also emphasized that novice interpreters should already possess strong foundational interpreting skills prior to entering legal

work. One participant advised interpreters to “be a good interpreter first,” while another recommended developing strong interpreting ability in other settings before transitioning into legal environments (Participant 66).

Overall, participants described qualification for legal interpreting as a gradual developmental process built through experience, mentorship, observation, and continued professional learning rather than through a single certification or training pathway alone.

Common Mistakes Among Novice Interpreters

Participants identified a range of common mistakes newer interpreters make when entering legal settings, many of which centered around preparedness, professional judgment, communication management, and understanding the interpreter’s role. Responses frequently emphasized that legal interpreting requires more than basic language fluency, and that newer interpreters often underestimate the complexity and high-stakes nature of legal work.

One of the most commonly reported concerns involved interpreters accepting assignments before they were adequately prepared or qualified. Participants described newer interpreters entering legal settings “to learn” rather than after developing sufficient competence and experience. Many participants emphasized that accepting work beyond one’s abilities can result in irrevocable harm despite good intentions. Several participants stressed the importance of honestly assessing readiness and recognizing professional limitations before accepting legal work.

Participants also highlighted issues related to communication management and self-advocacy within courtroom settings. Many of these concerns included failing to ask questions, not requesting clarification when needed, and not halting proceedings during misunderstandings or communication breakdowns. One participant emphasized the importance

of following courtroom protocol when correcting the record as there are a series of required steps necessary to do so. Responses further suggested that newer interpreters may struggle to advocate for communication access appropriately due to the high-pressure context of legal environments.

Another recurring theme involved role confusion and misunderstandings surrounding professional boundaries. Participants noted that newer interpreters may sometimes step outside of their role by providing advice to Deaf consumers or approach legal assignments with the same relaxed, interactional style used in community interpreting settings. Many respondents went on to explain that legal and community settings are defined by distinct forms of interaction, boundaries and neutrality. Participants also stressed the importance of understanding courtroom etiquette, protocol, and the interpreter's responsibility to remain neutral throughout proceedings.

Interpreting-specific concerns were also repeatedly mentioned. Participants identified lack of ASL fluency, insufficient interpreting experience, weak consecutive interpreting skills, poor note-taking, and difficulty managing register as common issues among novice interpreters. Several responses emphasized that newer interpreters may focus too heavily on individual signs or terminology without fully understanding legal meaning or intent. One participant described this as "not making the implicit explicit" (Participant 56). This highlights the complexity involved in conveying meaning accurately within legal discourse.

Finally, participants emphasized the emotional and interpersonal challenges newer interpreters may face in legal settings. Responses referenced both overconfidence and lack of confidence as barriers to effective practice. Overconfidence was described as newer interpreters taking on legal work without sufficient training or experience and believing they could "manage", or being unwilling to learn from a more experienced interpreter. Conversely, lack of confidence appeared in interpreters hesitating to self-advocate by asking for clarification,

requesting pauses, or interrupting proceedings when communication issues arose. Another cited barrier to effective practice among newer interpreters was difficulty working collaboratively within interpreting teams. One participant noted the importance of humility, while others stressed the need to remain open to feedback, ask for support, and recognize the broader impact interpreting decisions may have on Deaf individuals navigating the legal system.

Overall, participants described common novice mistakes as stemming not only from limited technical skills, but also from gaps in judgment, preparation, self-awareness, and understanding of the unique demands of legal interpreting environments.

Resources and Training Design

This section examines how participants described the resources, self-assessment practices, and training structures that support preparation for legal interpreting work. Responses included recommended books, workshops, court manuals, websites, organizations, mentorship opportunities, and self-study practices, as well as reflections on how interpreters determine their own readiness for specific legal assignments. Participants also offered recommendations for what an ideal training pathway for new legal interpreters should include. Together, these responses show that preparation for legal interpreting is not limited to accessing resources alone, but also involves ongoing self-assessment, structured learning, mentorship, and supervised practice. Table 5 summarizes the resources participants recommended for interpreters pursuing legal work.

Table 5

Recommended Resources for Interpreters Pursuing Legal Work

Resource Type	Examples Mentioned by Participants
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Books	Legal interpreting texts, legal terminology references
Trainings/Workshops	Court interpreter workshops, legal immersion programs
Organizations	RID, state interpreter organizations
Self-Study	Court observation, independent legal research

A complete list of participant-recommended resources is provided in Appendix B.

Assessing Readiness for Legal Assignments

Participants described readiness for legal assignments as highly dependent on the specifics of the assignment itself. Factors such as the type of case, communication needs of the client, legal content, interpreting team, and personal experience were all considered when determining whether to accept an assignment. Many participants also emphasized the importance of preparation, including gathering background information, reviewing terminology, consulting with colleagues, and considering whether additional supports, such as a Deaf interpreter, were needed.

A major theme across responses was the importance of preparation and information gathering prior to accepting an assignment. Participants described reviewing dockets, requesting motions or police reports, researching charges, and clarifying the interpreter role needed for the proceeding. These responses suggest that readiness was often assessed through active preparation rather than assumed competence alone.

Participants also emphasized the importance of understanding one's own limitations and honestly evaluating skill level. Responses frequently highlighted the need to assess familiarity with legal terminology, ability to work with diverse Deaf populations, and capacity to remain

neutral within legal environments. One participant described considering whether they had “the knowledge and intracommunicative skills for the topic” (Participant 96). Several participants further emphasized the importance of seeking feedback from colleagues or requesting replacement interpreters when necessary.

Interpreting team dynamics can also be a major factor in determining readiness. Participants frequently referenced the importance of having a strong team, effective communication, and the ability to request a Deaf interpreter when appropriate. These responses highlight how readiness was viewed not only as an individual skill set, but also as dependent on collaboration and appropriate support systems.

Finally, responses showed differing perspectives regarding experience and confidence over time. Some highly experienced interpreters described feeling prepared for nearly any assignment after decades of legal work. For example, one participant stated, “After many years, I presume I am ready for any type of assignment” (Participant 13). Others, however, emphasized that experience does not eliminate the need for caution and preparation. One participant with extensive legal experience shared, “I have been in law since 1990. I work side by side with a Deaf Prosecutor. I know the law more than most interpreters. I am in the judges chambers almost weekly, AND STILL I am nervous with every assignment...” (Participant 65). Overall, these responses suggest that readiness for legal interpreting is an ongoing process of preparation, self-assessment, and professional judgment rather than a fixed endpoint of competence.

Training Pathway Recommendations for New Legal Interpreters

When participants were asked what a training pathway for new legal interpreters should include, responses were largely consistent across participants. Most emphasized that legal interpreting preparation should happen gradually and be built on strong general interpreting skills

before entering legal settings. Common recommendations included ASL and English fluency, years of interpreting experience, legal-specific training, mentorship, courtroom observation, and supervised practice.

Many participants described legal interpreter preparation as a step-by-step process that should increase in difficulty over time. Responses commonly recommended foundational interpreting experience and certification first, followed by legal terminology training, courtroom observation, mentorship, and opportunities to practice in lower-risk settings before taking more complex assignments.

Mentorship and observation were among the most frequently mentioned components of an effective training pathway. Participants repeatedly emphasized the importance of shadowing experienced legal interpreters, observing courtroom proceedings, and having opportunities to debrief after assignments, emphasizing supported, experience-based learning. One participant described the value of “pairing experienced and novice legal interpreters together to interpret and then debrief,” explaining that this kind of guided experience helps build “true competence and confidence” (Participant 63). Other suggestions included mock trials, role play activities, sight translation of legal forms, ethics training, and exposure to different kinds of legal settings and proceedings. Several participants emphasized that interpreters should learn not only legal terminology and courtroom procedures, but also how to interact professionally within legal environments, work effectively with teams, and manage courtroom communication dynamics.

Finally, some participants noted that strong legal interpreting training models already exist and do not necessarily need to be reinvented. Responses referenced workshops, archived programs, and initiatives such as Project CLIMB as examples of resources that could still inform future legal interpreter training pathways. Overall, participants described legal interpreter

preparation as an ongoing developmental process grounded in strong interpreting skills, structured legal education, mentorship, observation, and supervised experience.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Overview of Findings

The findings of this study suggest that preparation for ASL–English legal interpreting is not a linear or standardized process, but rather a layered and ongoing pathway shaped by multiple forms and approaches to learning. Participants consistently described legal interpreting preparation as something developed through a combination of formal training, mentorship, observation, teaming, and real-world experience. Rather than pointing to one clear credentialing route, participants described preparation as a process that often unfolds over time. This process includes continuous exposure, guided practice, and professional judgment.

Formal training and workshops were identified as important starting points, particularly for building foundational knowledge of legal terminology, courtroom procedures, ethical expectations, and the role of the interpreter in legal settings. However, participants also made clear that formal training alone was not enough. Across responses, mentorship and community-based learning emerged as central to developing confidence, judgment, and readiness for legal work. Participants frequently emphasized the value of learning from experienced legal interpreters, observing court proceedings, working in teams, and having opportunities to debrief and ask questions.

The findings also show that legal interpreting competence is broader than language fluency alone. Participants identified essential competencies such as legal knowledge, interpreting skill, ethical decision-making, courtroom interaction, cultural awareness, and the ability to assess the communication needs of Deaf individuals. Readiness was also described as assignment-specific rather than fixed. Even experienced interpreters reported considering the

type of case, the interpreting team, the Deaf client's needs, and their own limits before accepting legal assignments.

Overall, the findings suggest that legal interpreter preparation is best understood as a dynamic process built through structured learning, mentorship, experience, and ongoing self-assessment. This has important implications for interpreter education and professional development, particularly in creating clearer, more supported pathways for interpreters moving into specialized legal work.

Defining Legal Settings: Broad and Overlapping Understandings

A central finding of this study is that participants did not define legal interpreting through one fixed or universally agreed-upon category. Instead, their responses showed that what “counts” as a legal setting can vary depending on the context, the people involved, and the potential consequences of the interaction. While many participants identified traditional legal environments such as courtrooms, attorney-client meetings, depositions, law enforcement interactions, and correctional settings, others described legal settings more broadly. These broader definitions included contexts where legal rights, documentation, liability, custody, immigration status, or other serious outcomes may be involved.

This finding matters because preparation for legal interpreting depends on how the field defines the work itself. Before interpreters can determine how to become qualified for legal settings, they must first understand what kinds of settings require legal-specific competence. Participant responses suggest that legal interpreting is not always defined by location alone. Instead, legal relevance may be determined by the presence of legal authority, legal consequences, formal documentation, or the possibility that an interpreted interaction could affect a Deaf individual's rights or future outcomes.

This connects to the literature on legal interpreting and legal discourse, which emphasizes that legal settings are shaped by institutional power, specialized language, procedural rules, and high-stakes consequences. In this study, participants' definitions reflected those same concerns, but they also showed that legal interpreting may extend into settings that are not always formally labeled as "court" or even "legal." This supports the idea that legal interpreting should be understood not only as work that occurs inside specific institutions, but also as work involving legal meaning, legal risk, and access to justice.

The variation in participant responses also points to a larger issue in the field: legal interpreting boundaries are not always clear. Some participants defined legal settings narrowly, focusing on courts and attorney-related interactions. Others included nontraditional or overlapping settings, such as medical, educational, social service, or administrative contexts when legal consequences were present. This variation suggests that interpreters may be responsible for making judgment calls about whether a particular assignment requires legal interpreting preparation, even when the assignment itself is not clearly labeled that way.

Overall, the findings suggest that defining legal interpreting is an important part of understanding preparation and readiness. If interpreters are expected to prepare for legal work, then the field must also consider what types of assignments fall under that category. Legal interpreting, as described by participants, includes formal legal settings as well as broader contexts where rights, consequences, documentation, or institutional power are involved. This broader understanding reinforces the need for interpreter education and professional development that helps interpreters recognize legal relevance across a range of settings, not only after they enter a courtroom.

Pathways Into Legal Interpreting Are Non-Linear

The findings of this study suggest that pathways into legal interpreting are not linear, standardized, or the same for every interpreter. Participants did not describe one clear route into legal work. Instead, their responses showed a range of entry points, including formal training, mentorship, professional encouragement, community need, personal interest, and gradual exposure to legal assignments over time. For some participants, legal interpreting was something they intentionally pursued. For others, it became part of their work because they were asked, encouraged, or needed in settings where qualified legal interpreters were limited.

This finding connects directly to sociocultural theory, which emphasizes that learning develops through social interaction, guidance, and participation with more knowledgeable others (Vygotsky, 1978). Participants frequently described mentors, colleagues, and experienced legal interpreters as central to their development. Legal interpreter preparation was not described as something interpreters develop alone, but as something shaped through professional relationships, guided practice, and access to experienced members of the field.

The findings also align with situated learning theory, particularly the idea that learning occurs through participation in authentic communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Participants described learning legal interpreting by observing court proceedings, shadowing experienced interpreters, teaming, debriefing, and gradually becoming more familiar with legal environments. These experiences reflect situated learning because participants were developing competence within the actual contexts where legal interpreting occurs, rather than only through classroom-based instruction.

At the same time, participants' responses suggest that formal training and observation alone are not enough. Legal interpreting requires repeated, intentional practice over time, which

connects to Ericsson's theory of deliberate practice. Ericsson (2006) emphasizes that expertise does not develop automatically through experience alone, but through focused practice, feedback, correction, and continued refinement. This is reflected in participants' descriptions of preparation as an ongoing process involving mentorship, reflection, and opportunities to improve performance in increasingly complex situations.

Overall, the findings suggest that legal interpreter development is best understood as a gradual and socially supported process. Participants' pathways reflect the combined importance of mentorship, authentic participation, deliberate practice, cognitive readiness, and meaning-based decision-making. Rather than becoming qualified through one program, one credential, or one moment of entry, legal interpreters appear to develop through repeated engagement with the field, supported by more experienced practitioners and shaped by the demands of real legal settings.

Competence Beyond Language Fluency

The findings of this study suggest that competence in ASL–English legal interpreting extends beyond language fluency alone. While participants emphasized the importance of strong ASL and English language skills, they also identified a much broader set of competencies needed for legal work. These included legal knowledge, procedural understanding, ethical judgment, role clarity, interactional skill, cultural awareness, and the ability to assess the communication needs of Deaf individuals. Participants described legal interpreting competence as multidimensional rather than solely limited to vocabulary knowledge or general interpreting ability.

This finding is significant because legal interpreting requires interpreters to understand not only language, but also the systems attached to that language and their ensuing

consequences. Participants repeatedly emphasized the importance of knowing legal terminology, courtroom procedures, the roles of court personnel, how to correct the record, and how different types of legal proceedings function. This supports the idea that legal interpreting is a specialized area of practice requiring knowledge of legal discourse and institutional procedure. As Hale (2004) explains, legal language is shaped by rules, power, credibility, and legal outcomes. Participant responses reflected this same idea by emphasizing that interpreters must understand the legal context in order to interpret accurately and responsibly.

Participants also emphasized that legal interpreting competence involves meaning transfer, not simply word-for-word interpretation. In legal settings, this is especially important because legal concepts may not have simple one-to-one equivalents across ASL and English. Participants' emphasis on understanding legal meaning, intent, and context suggests that competence requires interpreters to interpret the meaning and function of legal discourse, not just individual terms.

Ethical judgment also emerged as a major part of competence. Participants described the need to understand the interpreter's role, maintain boundaries, remain neutral, avoid conflicts of interest, and know when to stop proceedings if communication access is compromised. This aligns with professional standards in the field, including the RID Code of Professional Conduct, which emphasizes accuracy, confidentiality, impartiality, and professional accountability (RID, 2005). However, participants' responses suggest that ethical competence in legal settings is not only about knowing the rules. It also requires real-time judgment, confidence, and the ability to act appropriately when communication or access is at risk.

Another important finding was that competence includes interactional and interpersonal skills. Participants described the need to communicate effectively with judges, attorneys, court

staff, Deaf consumers, Deaf interpreters, and interpreting teams. This connects to Wadensjö's (1998) view of interpreting as an interaction, where interpreters are not simply transferring language in isolation but also participating in communication shaped by relationships, roles, and expectations. In legal settings, these interactional demands are often heightened because interpreters must manage communication while maintaining neutrality, professionalism, and respect for court procedure.

Finally, participants emphasized cultural and client-centered competence, particularly in relation to Deaf individuals' access to legal processes. Responses referenced language deprivation, fund of information gaps, the need for Deaf interpreters, and awareness of power, privilege, and oppression. This finding connects to literature on legal interpreting as an access and equity issue, where interpreter-mediated communication can directly affect participation, fairness, and legal outcomes. Yi (2024) describes court interpreters as "gatekeepers" of procedural justice and linguistic equity. This emphasizes that access to court interpreting is tied to social inclusion and fairness within legal proceedings. Participant responses suggest that competent legal interpreters must be able to recognize when communication is not fully accessible and understand how language, culture, and legal power intersect.

Overall, these findings suggest that legal interpreting competence is a combination of linguistic, legal, ethical, cultural, and interpersonal abilities. A fluent, skilled interpreter is not automatically prepared for legal work. Legal competence requires the ability to understand legal systems, transfer meaning accurately, maintain ethical boundaries, work effectively with others, and assess whether communication access is truly being achieved. This supports the need for legal interpreter preparation that goes beyond terminology and certification and instead develops the full range of competencies required for high-stakes legal settings.

Readiness, Risk, and Professional Judgement

The findings of this study suggest that readiness for legal interpreting is an ongoing and contextual process, rather than a fixed status. Participants described readiness as something that must be evaluated in relation to each assignment. Readiness is not solely determined by certification, years of experience, or completion of a training program. Additional factors such as the type of case, the Deaf individual's communication needs, the availability of a team or Deaf interpreter, the interpreter's familiarity with the content, and the level of preparation available all influenced whether participants felt prepared to accept legal work.

This finding is important because it challenges the idea that an interpreter is either simply "qualified" or "not qualified." While credentials and training matter, participant responses suggest that legal interpreting requires ongoing self-assessment and professional judgment. An interpreter may be qualified for one type of legal assignment but not another, depending on the demands of the setting. For example, an interpreter may feel prepared for one attorney-client meeting based on the known facts of the assignment, but not for another attorney-client meeting involving unfamiliar legal issues, complex communication needs, or heightened emotional content. This suggests that readiness in legal interpreting is not a permanent status, but a decision-making process that must be revisited across assignments.

Participants' descriptions of readiness directly connect to the cognitive demands of interpreting. In legal settings, these demands may be increased by specialized terminology, rapid exchanges, unfamiliar procedures, and the pressure of producing an accurate interpretation in a high-stakes environment. When participants described gathering background information, reviewing terminology, requesting documents, consulting with colleagues, or determining

whether a Deaf interpreter was needed, they were describing strategies for managing these demands before they became overwhelming during the assignment.

Readiness also connects to Ericsson's theory of deliberate practice, which emphasizes that expertise develops through intentional practice, feedback, and continued refinement rather than experience alone (Ericsson, 2006). Several participants described readiness as something that continues to develop over time, even for experienced interpreters. This suggests that legal interpreter competence is not simply gained through exposure, but through reflective practice, preparation, and the willingness to recognize one's own limitations. In this way, self-assessment becomes part of professional growth.

The risks identified by participants further show why readiness matters. Participants described common novice mistakes such as accepting assignments too early, failing to ask for clarification, not correcting the record, misunderstanding the interpreter's role, struggling to work with a team, or focusing too narrowly on terminology without understanding legal meaning. These mistakes are not minor in legal settings. Because interpreted communication can affect rights, testimony, credibility, and access to legal processes, gaps in readiness can have serious consequences for Deaf individuals.

This finding also connects to professional standards and ethical responsibility. The RID Code of Professional Conduct emphasizes accuracy, confidentiality, impartiality, and professional accountability (RID, 2005). Participant responses suggest that accountability includes knowing when to accept an assignment, when to decline, when to request support, and when to interrupt proceedings to protect communication access. In legal settings, ethical practice is not only about following professional rules, but also about exercising judgment in real time.

Overall, the findings suggest that readiness, risk, and professional judgment are deeply connected. Legal interpreters must not only develop the skills required for legal work, but also the self-awareness to recognize when an assignment exceeds their current preparation.

Participants' responses show that readiness is best understood as an ongoing process of preparation, self-assessment, and responsible decision-making. This reinforces the need for legal interpreter education that teaches not only terminology and procedure, but also how to evaluate risk, request support, work with teams, and make ethical decisions about readiness for legal assignments.

Implications for Legal Interpreter Education and Training

The findings of this study have several implications for legal interpreter education and training. Overall, participants' responses suggest that preparation for legal interpreting should be more structured, supported, and developmental. While many participants described formal training, workshops, mentorship, observation, and experience as important, these opportunities were not always part of one clear pathway. Instead, interpreters often had to piece together their own preparation through available programs, professional relationships, and trial-and-error learning. This suggests a need for training models that provide clearer guidance for interpreters moving toward legal work.

One implication is that legal interpreter education should go beyond terminology and courtroom procedure. While legal vocabulary and procedural knowledge are essential, participants' responses show that these areas are only part of legal interpreting competence. Training should also address ethical judgment, role clarity, teamwork, self-advocacy, cultural awareness, and decision-making under pressure. Interpreters need to understand not only legal

concepts, but also how to manage communication in high-stakes settings where accuracy and access may directly affect Deaf individuals' rights and outcomes.

The findings also suggest that mentorship, observation, and supervised practice should be built more intentionally into legal interpreter preparation. Participants repeatedly emphasized the value of learning from experienced legal interpreters, observing legal settings, working in teams, and debriefing after assignments. This aligns with sociocultural theory and situated learning theory, which emphasize learning through guided participation, social interaction, and authentic professional contexts (Vygotsky, 1978; Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Another implication is the need to teach readiness and self-assessment more explicitly. Participants described readiness as contextual and assignment-specific, not something solely guaranteed by certification or years of experience. Training should therefore help interpreters evaluate the type of legal matter, available preparation materials, communication needs of the Deaf individual, team composition including a possible need for a Deaf interpreter, and their own limits before accepting assignments.

Finally, training should prepare interpreters for the broader range of legal and legal-adjacent settings identified by participants, including attorney-client meetings, law enforcement interactions, correctional settings, immigration, child welfare, medical-legal contexts, and other situations involving legal rights or consequences. Overall, these findings support the need for legal interpreter education that combines structured training with mentorship, observation, supervised practice, and ongoing professional judgment. A clearer and more supported pathway could help interpreters enter legal work with stronger preparation while promoting more accurate and ethical access for Deaf individuals.

Limitations of the Study

This study was designed to explore interpreters' perspectives on preparation, competence, and readiness for ASL–English legal interpreting. Because the study focused on participant perspectives, the findings reflect how interpreters described and made meaning of their own experiences. This approach provided valuable insight into how legal interpreting preparation is understood within the field; however, the study did not include direct observation of interpreting practice or assessment of interpreter performance.

Another limitation is that the study could not capture the experiences of every ASL–English legal interpreter. Although participants represented a range of backgrounds and professional experiences, the findings reflect only the perspectives of those who chose to participate. As a result, the findings should be understood as offering insight into participant experiences rather than representing the full range of legal interpreting practice.

Participants also represented a range of professional contexts. While this added depth to the data, it also means that responses were shaped by different state requirements, court systems, agency practices, certification structures, and local interpreting communities. Therefore, the findings reflect varied practitioner experiences rather than one fixed or universal pathway into legal interpreting.

Even with these limitations, the findings offer meaningful insight into how interpreters understand the process of preparing for legal interpreting work.

Summary

This chapter discussed the major findings of the study in relation to the existing literature and theoretical frameworks. Overall, the findings suggest that preparation for ASL–English legal interpreting is not a single, standardized pathway, but an ongoing process shaped by formal

training, mentorship, observation, experience, self-assessment, and professional judgment. Participants described legal interpreting as a broad area of specialized practice, with legal settings defined not only by location, but also by legal consequences, institutional authority, documentation, rights, and access.

The findings also suggest that competence in legal interpreting extends beyond language fluency alone. Legal interpreters must develop legal knowledge, ethical judgment, procedural awareness, interactional skills, cultural responsiveness, and the ability to assess readiness in context. Together, these findings highlight the need for clearer and more supported pathways into legal interpreting, including structured training, mentorship, observation, supervised practice, and ongoing professional development. This chapter reinforces the importance of preparing interpreters not only to work in legal settings, but to do so with accuracy, ethical awareness, and responsibility to Deaf individuals' access within the legal system.

Chapter 6: Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

This study explored the preparation pathways of ASL–English interpreters working in legal and court settings, with the goal of better understanding the training, mentorship, and professional experiences that contribute to interpreter readiness and competence. Using a qualitative approach, data were collected through an anonymous online questionnaire and analyzed using thematic and narrative analysis. Findings revealed that interpreters do not follow a single, standardized pathway into legal interpreting. Instead, preparation emerged as a gradual and multi-layered process shaped by formal training, mentorship, courtroom observation, professional experience, and ongoing self-assessment.

The findings of this study highlight the central role of experiential learning and professional socialization in the development of legal interpreting competence. Participants consistently emphasized that legal readiness extends beyond certification or workshop attendance and instead develops through sustained exposure to legal settings, mentorship from experienced interpreters, teaming experiences, and reflective practice. Readiness for legal work was also described as highly contextual, with interpreters considering factors such as assignment type, client communication needs, legal content, and team dynamics when determining whether to accept an assignment.

Findings further suggest that legal interpreting competence is multidimensional and involves more than linguistic fluency alone. Participants identified legal knowledge, ethical judgment, courtroom protocol, cultural responsiveness, interpersonal skills, and the ability to assess one's own limitations as essential to effective legal practice. Participants also identified recurring challenges for novice interpreters, including accepting assignments before being

adequately prepared, hesitating to self-advocate, misunderstanding courtroom protocol, and struggling with the demands of team interpreting.

Based on these findings, several recommendations can be made for interpreter education and professional development. First, interpreter education programs should incorporate more structured opportunities for mentorship, courtroom observation, and supervised legal interpreting experiences. Second, increased access to specialized legal interpreting training and scaffolded learning opportunities may help bridge the gap between general interpreter preparation and the demands of legal work. Third, courts, agencies, and interpreter educators should work toward clearer and more transparent pathways into legal interpreting, including stronger guidance around readiness, qualifications, and appropriate supports such as Deaf interpreter teaming.

Future research should continue exploring legal interpreter preparation across more geographically and professionally diverse samples. Additional research may further examine the role of Deaf interpreters in mentorship and legal teaming, differences in qualification practices across jurisdictions, and the effectiveness of specific legal interpreter training models. Continued research in this area may help support the development of more equitable, accessible, and effective preparation pathways for ASL–English legal interpreters.

In conclusion, this study contributes to a growing body of research emphasizing the complexity of legal interpreter preparation and the importance of multiple, interconnected learning experiences. Rather than a single credential or training pathway, participants described competence as something developed gradually through mentorship, experience, reflection, and continued learning. By highlighting the diverse ways interpreters prepare for legal work, this study offers insight into how the field may better support the development of competent, ethical, and confident legal interpreters.

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- University of Northern Colorado (2021, December 3). *Project CLIMB: Cultivating Legal Interpreters from Minority Backgrounds*. Project CLIMB.
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Appendix A

Legal Interpreting Questionnaire

Legal Interpreting Questionnaire

Title of Study:
From Novice to Legal Interpreter: Pathways, Competencies, and Preparation in ASL–English Court Interpreting

Researcher:
Allison Freshley, Graduate Student
Western Oregon University
Email: afreshley24@mail.wou.edu

Faculty Advisor:
Elisa Maroney, Ph. D., Chair, Division of Deaf Studies & Professional Studies
Western Oregon University
Email: maronee@wou.edu

Purpose
You are invited to take part in a research study about how ASL–English interpreters learn to work in legal and court settings. The goal of this study is to understand training paths and skills so future interpreters can be better prepared.

What You Will Do
If you agree, you will complete an online questionnaire with written questions about your experience as an interpreter. The questionnaire will take about 15–20 minutes. You may skip any question and stop at any time.

Risks
This study involves very low risk. Some questions may cause mild discomfort when reflecting on work experiences. You may skip any question or stop at any time without penalty.

Benefits
There is no payment for participation. Possible benefits include reflecting on your professional experience and contributing to research that may help future interpreters.

Privacy
Your responses are anonymous. No names, employers, or specific case details will be collected. Data will be stored in a password-protected account and reported only in a general way so individuals cannot be identified.

Voluntary Participation
Participation is completely voluntary. You may choose not to participate or withdraw at any time without penalty.

Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?
You may contact the Principal Investigator, Allison Freshley at afreshley24@mail.wou.edu. Or you may contact my thesis committee chair Dr. Elisa Maroney maronee@mail.wou.edu.

Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?
This study has been reviewed and approved by the Western Oregon University Institutional Review Board (IRB). If you have any questions about your rights as a participant, you may contact the WOU Institutional Review Board at any time regarding the study at 503-838-0200.

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Legal Interpreting Questionnaire

* Indicates required question

Informed Consent

You are invited to participate in a research study examining how ASL–English interpreters become qualified to work in legal settings. Participation is voluntary. Your responses will be anonymous and may be used in a graduate thesis. You may stop at any time or skip any questions you do not wish to answer.

By selecting “I agree,” you indicate that you are at least 18 years old and consent to participate.



Informed Consent *

- ☐ I agree to participate
- ☐ I do not agree to participate

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NOVICE TO LEGAL INTERPRETER

Background

How many years have you worked as an ASL–English interpreter?

- ☐ Less than 2
- ☐ 2–5
- ☐ 6–10
- ☐ 10+

Which settings do you currently interpret in? (Select all that apply)

- ☐ Legal / court
- ☐ Educational (K–12)
- ☐ Postsecondary
- ☐ Medical
- ☐ Community
- ☐ Performance
- ☐ Government
- ☐ VRS
- ☐ VRI
- ☐ Other: _____

Do you currently accept legal interpreting assignments?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

NOVICE TO LEGAL INTERPRETER

Professional Experience

How do you define a “legal setting” in ASL/English interpreting?

Your answer _____

What types of legal assignments do you interpret most often?

Your answer _____

Qualifications & Pathway

How did you get started interpreting in legal settings?

Your answer _____

What training, mentorship, or experiences helped prepare you?

Your answer _____



What certifications or credentials do you currently hold?

Your answer _____

How do courts or agencies determine who is “qualified” in the absence of a legal certificate?

Your answer _____



NOVICE TO LEGAL INTERPRETER

Competencies

What skills or knowledge areas are essential for interpreters working in legal settings?

Your answer

What do you wish you had known before taking your first legal assignment?

Your answer



Guidance for Novices

What steps should a novice interpreter take to become qualified for legal work?

Your answer

What common mistakes do you see newer interpreters make in legal contexts? •

Your answer



NOVICE TO LEGAL INTERPRETER

Resources

What resources (books, trainings, court manuals, websites) do you recommend for interpreters pursuing legal work?

Your answer

How do you assess your own readiness for a specific legal assignment?

Your answer



If you could design a training pathway for new legal interpreters, what would it include?

Your answer

Legal Interpreting Questionnaire

Thank you for your participation! Your responses have been successfully submitted. We appreciate the time you took to complete this form.

[Edit your response](#)

[Submit another response](#)

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Appendix B

Complete List of Participant-Recommended Resources for Legal Interpreting

Books and Publications

Brunson, J. (Ed.). (2022). *Legal interpreting: Teaching, research, and practice* (Vol. 12).

Gallaudet University Press.

Feinman, J. M. (2023). *Law 101: Everything you need to know about American law* (6th ed.).

Oxford University Press.

Guthmann, D., Lomas, G. I., Paris, D. G., & Martin, G. A. T. (Eds.). (2021). *Deaf people in the criminal justice system: Selected topics on advocacy, incarceration, and social justice*.

Gallaudet University Press.

Humphreys, L., & Rumsey, D. (2018). *The professional sign language interpreter's handbook:*

The complete practical manual for the interpreting profession (4th ed.). Sign Language Interpreting Media.

Makkai, A., Boatner, M. T., & Gates, J. E. (2004). *A dictionary of American idioms* (4th ed.).

Barron's Educational Series.

Mathers, C. (2006). *Sign language interpreters in court: Understanding best practices*.

AuthorHouse.

Mauet, T. A. (1992). *Fundamentals of trial techniques*. Little Brown & Co Law & Business

Mauet, T. A., & Easton, S. D. (2024). *Trial techniques and trials* (12th ed.). Aspen Publishing.

Mauet, T. A., Wolfson, W. D., & Kreag, J. (2023). *Trial evidence* (8th ed.). Aspen Publishing.

Mikkelsen, H. (2000). *Introduction to court interpreting (Translation practices explained)*.

Routledge.

NOVICE TO LEGAL INTERPRETER

Mikkelsen, H., Gonzalez, R., and Vásquez, V. (2012). *Fundamentals of court interpretation: Theory, policy and practice* (2nd ed.). Carolina Academic Press

Mindess, A. (2014). *Reading between the signs: Intercultural communication for sign language interpreters* (3rd ed.). Intercultural Press.

Potterfield, T. (2012). *Law enforcement interpreting for deaf persons*. Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, Inc.

Russell, D. L. (2000). *Interpreting in legal contexts: Consecutive and simultaneous interpretation* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Calgary).

<https://doi.org/10.11575/PRISM/20836>

Russell, D., & Hale, S. (Eds.). (2008). *Interpreting in legal settings* (1st ed.). Gallaudet University Press.

Trainings and Workshops

- “Intro to ASL Interpreting for Law Enforcement”
- “The Arraignment Process”
- “Working in Locked Facilities: Unlocking Your Confidence and Skill to Go Beyond the Slider”
- Foundations of Court Interpreting Workshop by Carla Mathers
- Legal Interpreter Training Institute (LITI)
- Legal Summit by 2Axend
- Professional Interpreting Enterprise (PIE)
- Project CLIMB: Cultivating Legal Interpreters from Minority Backgrounds
- Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf: *Right to Communication: Pathways to Justice*, inspired by *Being Michelle*

NOVICE TO LEGAL INTERPRETER

- SC:L Written Test Prep
- Terp Summit
- Travis County Court Mentorship Program (Texas)

Note. This list includes trainings, workshops, mentorship programs, summits, and course materials identified by participants as relevant to legal interpreting preparation. Some listed items may be archived, inactive, no longer offered, or no longer regularly updated.

Organizations and Professional Resources

- AQI Services
- Ayuda Legal Training (DC)
- CATIE Center
- De La Mora Interpreting
- Jacobo Gallego's Interpreting & Training
- National Center for State Courts (NCSC)
- National Consortium of Interpreter Education Centers (NCIEC)
- NCIEC UNCO Legal Program (2000–2015)
- Parking Lot Debrief Podcast Episode: “Everyday Realities of Legal Interpreting”
- RID's Legal Interpreter Member Section (LIMS)
- Signs of Development
- TerpAcademy

Note. This list includes organizations, websites, training programs, podcasts, and other resources identified by participants as relevant to legal interpreting preparation. Some items may be archived, inactive, or no longer regularly updated.

NOVICE TO LEGAL INTERPRETER

Participant-Identified Self-Study, Training, and Practice Activities

- Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Basic Knowledge Certification
- Collegiate legal courses or paralegal degree programs through local community colleges
- Community of practice among seasoned legal interpreters
- Court-ordered education and treatment programs (e.g., Alcoholics Anonymous [AA], Narcotics Anonymous [NA], and other court-mandated classes)
- Forensics, ballistics, and other expert-testimony topics
- Legal dictionaries:
 - Garner, B. A. (Ed.). (2024). *Black's law dictionary* (12th ed.). Thomson Reuters.
 - Oran, D., & Tosti, M. (2007). *Oran's dictionary of the law*. Cengage Learning.
- Legal dictionary in ASL
- Local court training
- Mentoring
- Mock trials and in-person group trainings
- Observation in courtrooms
- Reading about court system issues and state and federal court interpreter manuals
- RoleSpace Theory
 - Llewellyn-Jones, P., & Lee, R. G. (2013). Getting to the core of role: Defining interpreters' role-space. *International Journal of Interpreter Education*, 5(2), 54–72.
 - Llewellyn-Jones, P., & Lee, R. G. (2014). *Redefining the role of the community interpreter: The concept of role-space*. SLI Press.
- The Great Courses for general legal materials

NOVICE TO LEGAL INTERPRETER

- Watching live court, legal television shows, reality legal shows, and legal procedural shows

Individuals Identified by Participants

The following individuals were identified by participants as people whose work, training, publications, or professional contributions they associated with legal interpreting preparation.

- Berk-Seligson, Susan
- Guthmann, Debra
- Howard, Nigel
- Lomas, Gabriel
- Mathers, Carla
- McDuffie, Anne
- Neumann-Solow, Sharon
- Witter-Merithew, Anna