

# The Texas BEI Interpreter Certification Tests: Exemplary Models of Valid and Reliable Certification Instruments for Interpreters for the Deaf

## What is the Texas BEI Interpreter Certification Process?

The Texas BEI interpreter certification process consists of a set of empirically-based, criterion-referenced tests sets of exams developed by the University of Arizona National Center for interpretation Testing, Research and Policy (UA National Center) and Texas Department of Assistive and Rehabilitative Services—Office for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services (DARS-DHHS).

### Characteristics of the BEI Interpreter Certification Process

- ✓ Valid
- ✓ Reliable
- ✓ Legally defensible
- ✓ *Highly effective* in identifying proficient interpreters for the deaf
- ✓ Furthers the enduring goal of equal access to rights, services, and education for the Deaf community

### How is the BEI interpreter certification process structured?

BEI certification is a two-stage process:

1. Written Test of English Proficiency
2. Interpreting performance examination
  - Three distinct levels: **Basic**, **Advanced**, and **Master**
  - Individual tests for each level, as required for valid and reliable assessment

### Sections of the Test of English Proficiency

- Reading Comprehension
- Synonyms
- Usage and Grammar
- Sentence Completion
- Antonyms

Designed to assess candidates' proficiency at the lexical, syntactical, and discourse levels

Written to assess the minimum level required for the work of interpreters for the deaf: 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade level

### Why a written Test of English Proficiency?

- ✓ Prerequisite for the BEI interpreting performance examinations
- ✓ Assesses a fundamental set of knowledge and skills for a proficient interpreter for the deaf: *English language proficiency*
- ✓ Efficient, cost-effective screening tool
  - Identifies candidates who have the greatest likelihood of success on the performance exams, which are more expensive to administer
  - 75 minute (1 1/4 hour) paper-and-pencil test that is easy and inexpensive to administer and score, yet produces a comprehensive assessment with very high reliability (K-R 20 reliability = 0.94)

### BEI Interpreter Performance Exam Sections

- Expressive Interpreting
- Expressive Transliterating
- Receptive Interpreting
- Receptive Transliterating\*
- Sight Translation

Designed to take less than 1 hour to complete

\*The Basic Exam combines the receptive interpreting and transliterating sections into a single section.

### Why three levels of certification?

There are three distinct levels of BEI certification—**Basic**, **Advanced**, and **Master**—each with its own interpreter performance test, without which the validity and reliability of the certification process would be seriously undermined. Each test was designed to reflect the specific settings,

level of complexity, modes of interpreting, and level of proficiency required for a proficient interpreter at that level, which was based on an empirical study of the work performed by interpreters for the deaf in Texas. Having multiple certification levels:

- ✓ Ensures that interpreters have the ***requisite level of interpreting ability***
- ✓ Enables the certification of the ***largest number of proficient interpreters*** to better fill the needs of the deaf community

### **What are the unique features of the performance tests?**

- ✓ **Well-defined Performance Standards**
  - Criterion-referenced passing scores established on the basis of the empirically determined minimum level of proficiency required for interpreters for the deaf.
  - Balances the required proficiency level with fairness to candidates
- ✓ **High Content Validity**
  - Test scenario and script development informed by expert judgment
- ✓ **Innovative Objective Scoring System**—Requires considerable planning during test development, but results in a ***less demanding, more accurate and consistent assessment***
  - Proven system that greatly enhances the tests' validity and reliability
  - Focuses on a large number of *specific* language and interpreting features and incorporates them into *discrete* testing items that represent the knowledge, skills, and abilities required of interpreters for the deaf
  - Basic exam includes 170 testing items, Advanced and Master exams each include 220
  - Raters are trained to focus exclusively on testing items, assessing candidates' performances based on their rendering of only those items
  - All raters evaluate candidates on exactly the same testing items, increasing the exams' reliability
  - Items are assessed on how well meaning is conveyed in the overall context
- ✓ **Rigorous Rater Training**
  - All raters are carefully trained in the use of the objective scoring system, according to specific and detailed guidelines
  - Rating teams consist of three members and include a deaf rater when possible
  - Raters' scores are tracked and analyzed for both inter-rater and inter-team agreement
  - Results in extraordinarily high levels of reliability between the both individual raters and rating teams

✓ **Consensus Scoring**

- Rating teams reach consensus on each candidate's performance, rather than averaging individual rater's scores
- Consensus process is more sensitive to the evolution of language and usage, including regional variation, colloquialisms, and novel expressions
- Results in a more accurate and reliable assessment

**What do interpreters say about the BEI Interpreter Certification Tests?**

**Test of English Proficiency:**

- ✓ *"The vocabulary sections were strong and diverse. This is such a vital area in day-to-day interpreting. I am glad to see it on the test. The grammar section [also assessed] another pitfall for interpreters that are vital in voicing."*
- ✓ *"I feel that the level of difficulty is sufficient for a basic English skills assessment and should definitely be accomplished successfully by anyone entertaining the interpreting field."*
- ✓ *"Overall, I think that the test was very good and tested areas critical to the understanding of English that make interpreting into ASL possible."*
- ✓ *"I believe this test contained questions which were fair and represented areas of English proficiency which interpreters at all levels should demonstrate."*

*Validity is...the most fundamental consideration in developing and evaluating tests. The process of validation involves accumulating evidence to provide a sound scientific basis for the...score interpretations.*

*Joint Commission of the AERA, APA & NCME, 1999, p. 9*

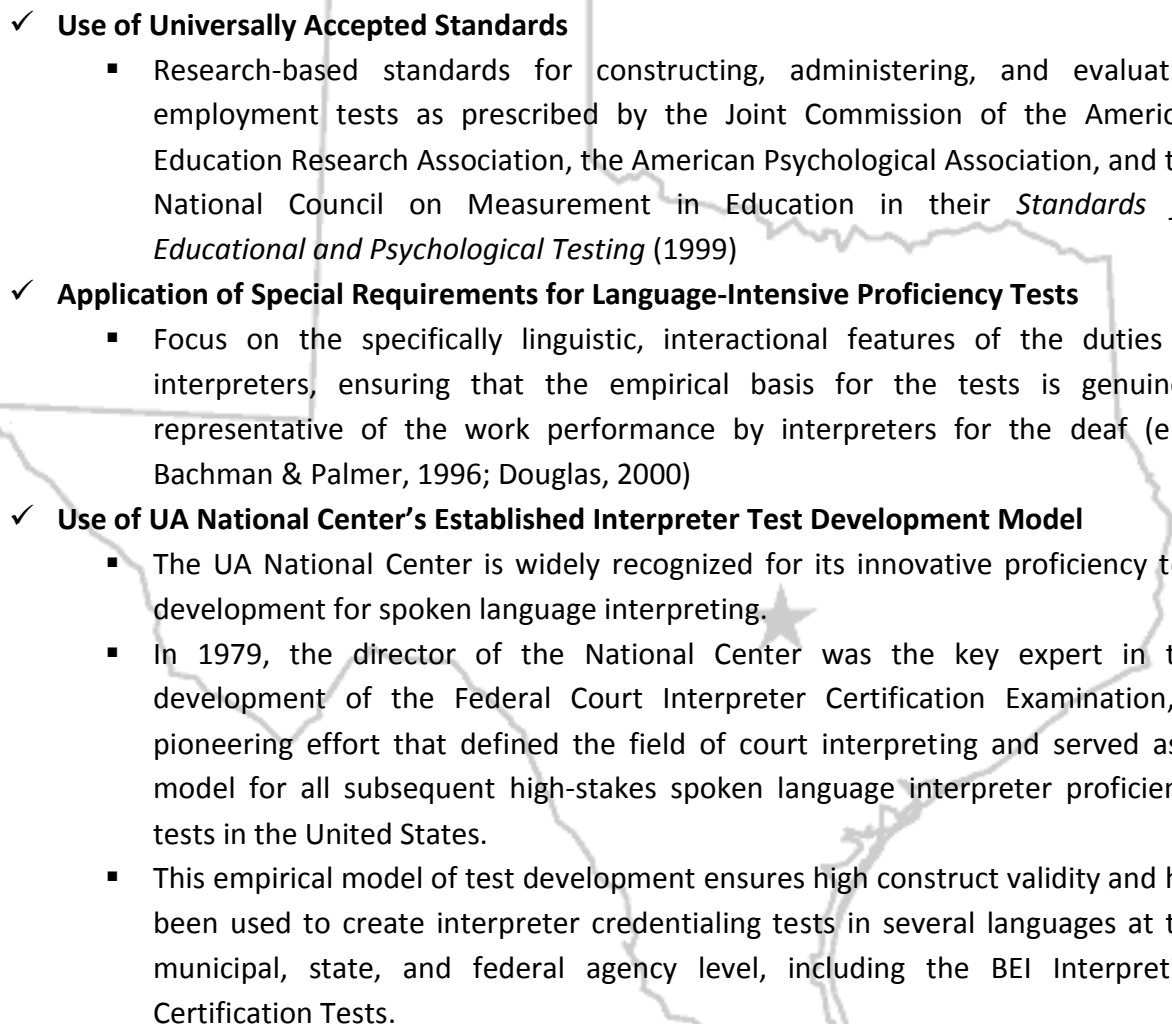
**Interpreting Performance Tests:**

- ✓ *"The setting, subjects, and speakers were REAL."*
- ✓ *"All in all, the test was an excellent example of what ... interpreters do on a regular basis!"*
- ✓ *"I truly felt challenged by the test and I feel that the data included represented what interpreters do."*

**Why are the BEI Interpreter Certification Tests Exemplary?**

Throughout the test development process, DARS-DHHS and the UA National Center adhered to the highest standards of validity advocated by scholars, practitioners, and the organizations who govern sound test development practice. The resulting BEI Interpreting Certification Tests are empirically grounded, reliable, fair, and valid.

### **What guidelines were followed during the test development process?**

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- ✓ **Use of Universally Accepted Standards**
    - Research-based standards for constructing, administering, and evaluating employment tests as prescribed by the Joint Commission of the American Education Research Association, the American Psychological Association, and the National Council on Measurement in Education in their *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing* (1999)
  - ✓ **Application of Special Requirements for Language-Intensive Proficiency Tests**
    - Focus on the specifically linguistic, interactional features of the duties of interpreters, ensuring that the empirical basis for the tests is genuinely representative of the work performance by interpreters for the deaf (e.g., Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Douglas, 2000)
  - ✓ **Use of UA National Center's Established Interpreter Test Development Model**
    - The UA National Center is widely recognized for its innovative proficiency test development for spoken language interpreting.
    - In 1979, the director of the National Center was the key expert in the development of the Federal Court Interpreter Certification Examination, a pioneering effort that defined the field of court interpreting and served as a model for all subsequent high-stakes spoken language interpreter proficiency tests in the United States.
    - This empirical model of test development ensures high construct validity and has been used to create interpreter credentialing tests in several languages at the municipal, state, and federal agency level, including the BEI Interpreting Certification Tests.

### **What steps were taken in developing the tests?**

DARS-DHHS and the UA National Center implemented the above guidelines by:

1. Conducting a comprehensive job/linguistic analysis of the work performed by interpreters for the deaf.

2. Creating well-defined test specifications.
3. Writing and revising the tests with experts in the field.
4. Pilot testing the initial instruments with a representative population.
5. Analyzing the exam data psychometrically for final revision and to establish criterion validity and cut scores.
6. Leading rater training conferences to ensure that test administrations met the exacting reliability requirements of high-stakes examinations.

### **What resulted from the test development efforts?**

The BEI certification process and tests have been meticulously crafted, with careful attention to ensuring their reliability, validity, and legal defensibility.

On the strength of the empirically-based development process employed in the test's construction, the Honorable Judge Milton Pollack ruled that:

*The said tests...bore a rational and proper relation to skills...required for requisite precision interpretation by bilingual interpreters in courtroom settings....*

*Seltzer v. Foley, 1980 (p. 608)*

- ✓ **Legal Defensibility: The End Product of the UA National Center Interpreter Testing Model**
  - Results in legally defensible exams that validly and reliably select interpreters who are proficient to work in a high-stakes setting.
  - In 1980 the Federal Court Interpreter Certification Examination prevailed in a challenge to its validity that was brought in federal court after its initial administration (Seltzer v. Foley, 1980).
- ✓ **Texas' implementation of this new system:**
  - Led to the overhaul of the certification system, reduced excessive variability, and ensured fair testing
  - Eliminated inappropriate competency standards and levels, thus improving delivery of service to the deaf community
  - Eliminated unreliable testing process and results
  - Set and improved educational standards for interpreters

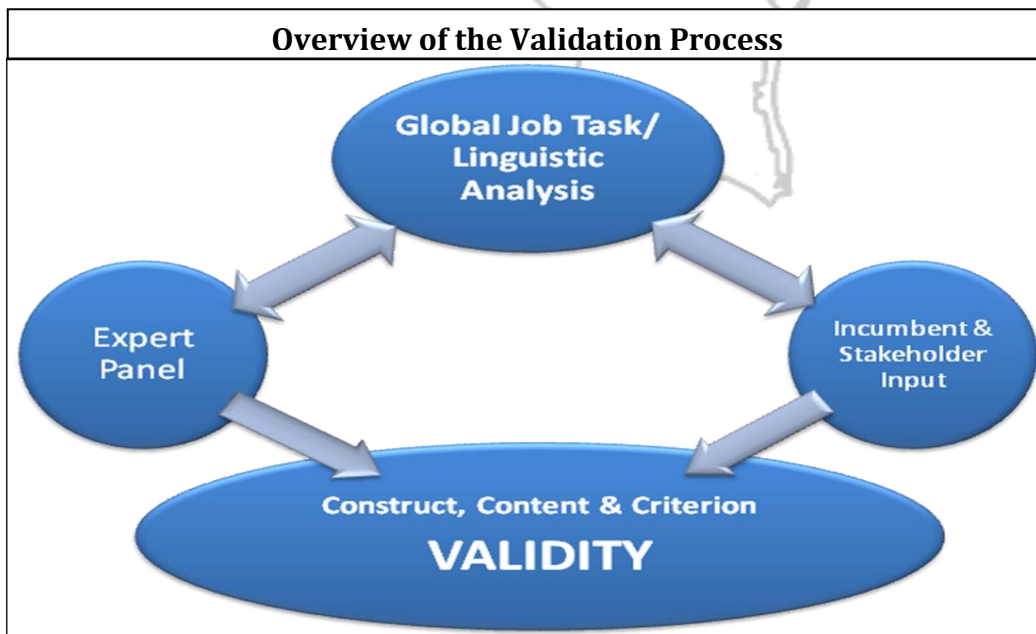
Most important, now that the BEI certification process has had 800 general administrations, it has **proven** itself efficient, cost-effective, and fair in certifying interpreters at three levels who are able to provide for the language service needs of the deaf community. In the end, this is also the strongest evidence of the validity of the BEI certification process.

## How were the BEI Interpreter Certification Tests Developed?

The BEI Interpreter Certification Tests' development began with an empirical investigation into of the nature of the work done by interpreters for the deaf, using multiple sources of data:

1. A thorough review and analysis of the previous BEI licensing tests and their supporting documents
2. An extensive survey of incumbent interpreters, which produced over 300,000 data points that were then subjected to detailed quantitative and qualitative analyses
3. Substantial input from an Expert Panel consisting of a diverse array of stakeholders, including not only working master interpreters but also interpreter trainers, certified deaf interpreters, deaf community members, and academicians, as well as other subject matter experts
  - Provided oversight and approval of all project activities **at every stage of development**

Expert Panel and incumbent data sources worked together to define the content, structure, and format of the resulting certification process and examinations, providing robust support for their validity. All pilot tests were administered to incumbents at different levels of interpreting proficiency and the resulting analysis of their performances indicated excellent criterion validity. Additional incumbent feedback gathered during that process further corroborated the overall validity of the examinations.



## Who Developed the BEI Interpreter Certification Tests?

The UA National Center is the major repository of the theoretical and practical aspects of specialized interpretation, its cognitive underpinnings, its ethical parameters, its best practice, its assessment, and the policy that guides its practice and assessment. The Center is committed to using this knowledge in support of its community—local, national and international—to ensure equal access to both civil rights and social services for all limited- and non-English members of the community, as it has for 30 years. Moreover, UA National Center is committed to doing so in a way which respects and supports the cultural and linguistic diversity that it sees as a profound asset within any community.

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