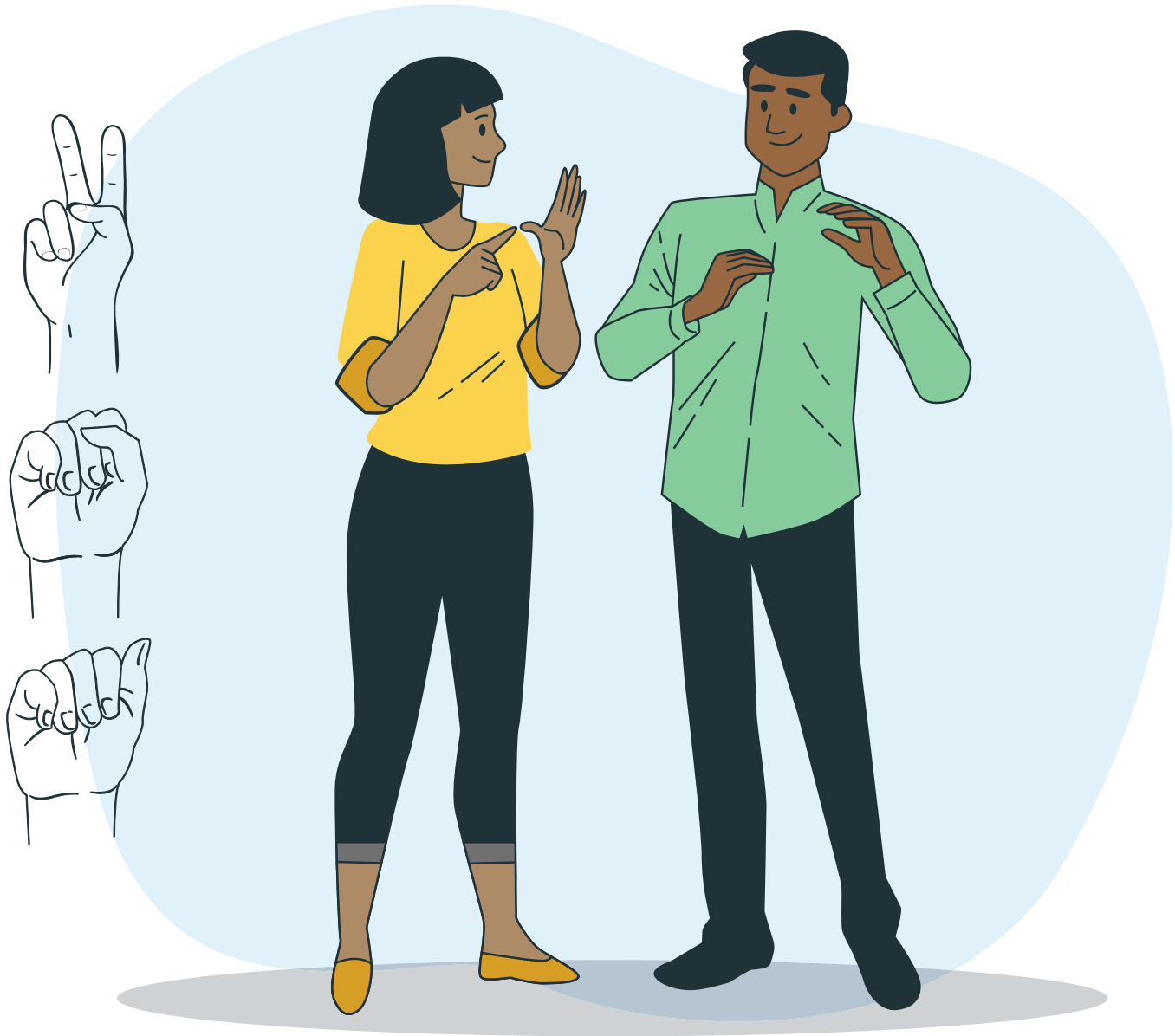


# EXPLORING TRILINGUAL

## SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETERS' NARRATIVES



### SKILL DEVELOPMENT AND WORK EXPERIENCES

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# Abstract

This article presents insights gleaned from interviews with experienced trilingual interpreters. The article examined the essential knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) and their perceived impact on the participants' interpreting careers in the field of ASL interpreting. Through content analysis of 8 qualitative interviews, their language acquisition journeys, educational trajectories, diverse work experiences, and confidence levels were explored. Participants representing varied backgrounds (race, ethnicity, language use and proficiency, geography, gender, etc.) illuminate the distinct challenges of trilingual interpreting. Their narratives underscore the nuanced nature of navigating multilingual settings and the need for specialized competencies such as quick language processing, switching between languages seamlessly, managing higher register terminology, and overall confidence working with all three languages. Participants unanimously recommend that interpreter training programs integrate strategies aimed at bolstering confidence in trilingual settings.

**Keywords:** trilingual sign language interpreters, specialization, knowledge, skills, abilities, healthcare, Spanish, English, American Sign Language



# Introduction

Trilingual sign language interpreters (TSLIs) generally work between various language combinations and modalities. However, this research focuses on American Sign Language (ASL) interpreting in the U.S., where TSLIs typically work between ASL, English, and Spanish (Annarino et al., 2014). The rising need for TSLIs within the United States is primarily a response to the increasing number of Deaf individuals within Spanish-speaking families. This trend can be attributed to demographic shifts and immigration patterns, which have led to a growing Deaf population in communities where Spanish is a prevalent language. Many Deaf individuals in these Spanish-speaking families primarily use ASL as their mode of communication; however, their communication needs are not always adequately met by interpreters fluent in only English and ASL (Hale & Mertens, 2016).

With this growing demand for trilingual interpreters, specialized training programs have started to emerge. These programs are designed to equip interpreters with the unique skills required to facilitate communication effectively in a trilingual context. The programs focus on building the interpreter's proficiency in ASL, Spanish, and English, along with a deep understanding of the cultural nuances associated with Deaf individuals within Spanish-speaking families (Zamora, 2021). It is worth highlighting that most trilingual interpreting work typically involves bilingual scenarios, where the interpreter navigates between a combination of two out of their three working languages. Despite this semblance of a bilingual nature, the trilingual interpreting work demands a distinct skill set and knowledge base that traditional bilingual interpreters may not possess.

Despite the increasing importance of trilingual interpreting, there is a notable gap in research documenting the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and abilities specific to TSLIs. This gap challenges the development of effective training programs and the establishment of best practices for interpreters in this field. As a result, both interpreters and the Deaf individuals they serve may not receive the level of support and service they require (Treviño et al., 2022).

To address this gap, this study conducts in-depth research on trilingual sign language interpreting, exploring the unique challenges and ethical considerations interpreters working within this specialized field encounter and the skill sets they require for effective communication (Johnson & Napier, 2016). Comprehensive research in this area will provide valuable insights into trilingual interpreting and serve as a foundation for developing training programs that can better prepare interpreters to meet the increasing demand for their services to the Deaf communities within Spanish-speaking families.



# RESEARCH QUESTIONS

How do Trilingual Sign Language Interpreters (TSLIs) perceive and navigate the challenges encountered in diverse sociolinguistic settings, particularly healthcare?

What are the perceived essential knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) necessary for effective interpretation across American Sign Language, spoken Spanish, and spoken English among TSLIs with varying backgrounds, including both certified and non-certified interpreters?

How do TSLIs reflect on their own metalinguistic role in interpreting settings, and what insights can be gained from their metacognitive processes, particularly in relation to language accessibility, cultural competence, and linguistic equity?



# Benefits of the Study

In a broader context, this research contributes to the multifaceted domains of multilingualism, language access, and the intricacies of interpreting within diverse sociolinguistic environments. This aligns with the global endeavor to foster linguistic equity and cultural competence, which are paramount in today's globalized society (Baker, 2013; Hale, 2007).

Moreover, this research can offer interpreters opportunities for metacognition, enabling them to critically assess their own knowledge, skills, and abilities through deliberate analysis and delineation. This heightened self-awareness can lead to more effective and ethical interpreting practices, ultimately benefiting the interpreters and the Deaf individuals they serve. Additionally, by promoting metalinguistic awareness about their language use in interpreted settings, interpreters can better navigate the complexities of trilingual interpreting and ensure effective communication for all parties involved (Roberts, 1997).

The results of this research will contribute to the enhancement of interpreter training programs, curriculum development, and certification standards.



# Methodology

The study engaged eight Trilingual Sign Language Interpreters (TSLIs) meeting specific demographic criteria, including proficiency in American Sign Language (ASL), English, and Spanish, and possessing a minimum of three years of experience in healthcare, educational, legal, or community contexts in all three languages. The study utilized network sampling methods by contacting RID members, Mano a Mano organization members, and individuals from previous research conducted by Myers and Lawyer (2023). This sampling method ensures that participants most suitable for the study's objectives were recruited, enabling the researcher to collect rich and relevant data that can lead to more insightful and targeted findings. The study included certified and non-certified interpreters to encompass diverse perspectives and recognize the unique challenges trilingual interpreters from marginalized communities face. The first eight respondents who met the criteria were selected for participation.

Data collection involved semi-structured interviews via Zoom, allowing participants to communicate in English, Spanish, or American Sign Language, with interviews primarily conducted in English with some Spanish. Recordings were transcribed and analyzed using MaxQDA software to identify knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) crucial for effective job performance; particularly in healthcare settings. The study adhered to ethical guidelines, obtaining written informed consent, ensuring participant anonymity and confidentiality, and allowing participants the right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. To ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants, this study identified each participant by a pseudonym, i.e., Participant 1 is P1, Participant 2 is P2, etc. The study was completed in early 2024, contributing to global efforts promoting linguistic equity and ethical interpreting practices in language services.



# Demographic Overview

The participants' ages ranged from 27 to 41 years, and they were from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. Three identified as White, three as Latino/a/x or Hispanic, and two as multiracial with Latino/a/x ethnicity. Gender distribution was balanced, with four participants identifying as female and four as male. Educational backgrounds ranged from high school diplomas to master's degrees, with varying certification levels among participants (see next section). Notably, one participant revealed during the interview that Spanish was their first language, but due to societal pressures, they were discouraged from using it, leading to adverse effects on their identity and linguistic development.

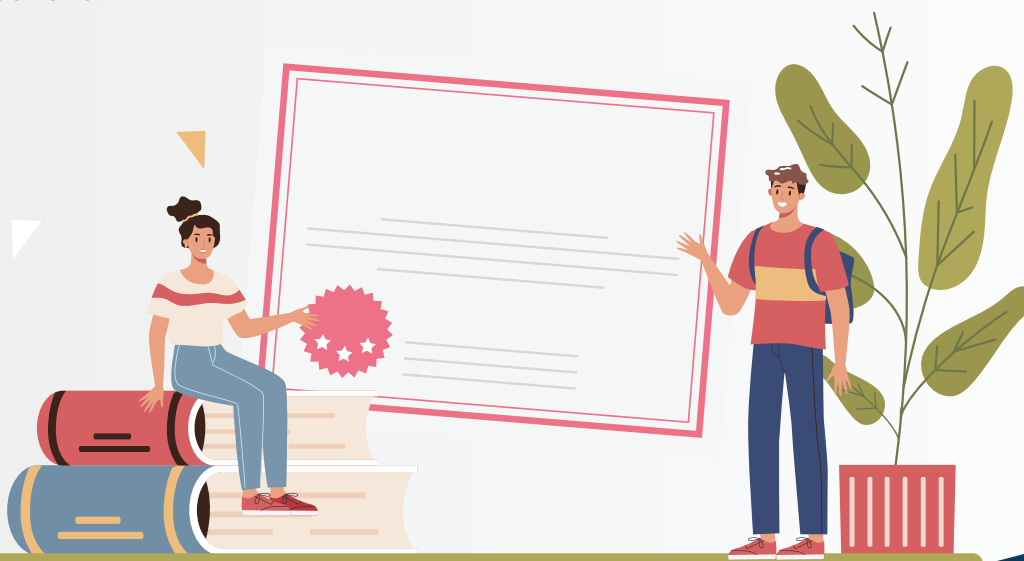


# Certification and Language Proficiency

Certification levels varied, with some participants holding Basic, Advanced Trilingual (BEI) certifications, NIC, CHI-Spanish, and CMI-Spanish, while others currently held none. Despite differences in certification, all participants were self-identified trilingual/multilingual interpreters, fluent in Spanish and English, with additional languages including ASL, LSM, Portuguese, Puerto Rican Sign Language, and Dominican Sign Language.

| Certification           | #of Participants | L1 English | L1 Spanish | L1 ASL |
|-------------------------|------------------|------------|------------|--------|
| None                    | 4                | 0          | 4          | 0      |
| Passed NIC Written      | 2                | 0          | 2          | 0      |
| NIC                     | 2                | 2          | 0          | 0      |
| BEI Basic               | 3                | 2          | 1          | 0      |
| BEI Advanced Trilingual | 1                | 0          | 1          | 0      |
| CMI-Spanish             | 1                | 1          | 0          | 0      |
| CHI-Spanish             | 2                | 2          | 0          | 0      |
| SLPI Superior           | 1                | 1          | 0          | 0      |
| Multiple                | 4                | 3          | 1          | 0      |

Among the eight participants, a notable discrepancy emerged in certification attainment based on their L1 (first language). Among the five participants whose L1 was Spanish, only one held certification, specifically BEI Basic and BEI Trilingual Advanced. In contrast, all three participants whose L1 was English possessed multiple certifications, showcasing a higher prevalence of certification among L1 English speakers. One of the L1 English speakers held both BEI and NIC certifications.





The dominance of heritage Spanish speakers among TSLIs underscores a prevailing trend where individuals rely on their native Spanish fluency when navigating trilingual settings while acquiring training in ASL/English interpretation (Annarino et al., 2014). This reliance on native fluency without formal English/Spanish training points to an intriguing dynamic within the field. In the domain of spoken language interpretation, certifications align with specialization, with the current national-level options being medical (Certification Commission for Healthcare Interpreters (CCHI) or the National Board of Certification for Medical Interpreters (NBCMI)) or legal (state-level or Federal Court Interpreter Certification). However, within sign language interpretation, a distinct certification framework prevails, characterized by national-level generalist certification and the option for specialist certificates, albeit currently under moratorium. Notably, the Texas-based Board for Evaluation of Interpreters (BEI) certification, gradually gaining national traction and recognition, offers the option for certification in medical or court specialization. Two of the three L1 English speakers in the study obtained medical certification in English/Spanish interpretation. However, all three participants were yet to attain legal certification, suggesting potential avenues for further professional development.

For L1 Spanish users, various factors influenced their pursuit of certification, including geographical considerations, confidence levels in English proficiency (specifically for the purposes of test-taking), and cost-benefit analyses regarding testing expenses and costs associated with certification maintenance versus professional advancement and financial return. These insights shed light on the nuanced decision-making processes shaping certification attainment among TSLIs and highlight the multifaceted nature of professional development within the field.



The demographic diversity among the eight participants, particularly regarding their language acquisition and certification, shows that trilingual interpreters are not a homogeneous group. This might require a differentiated approach to the education and certification of trilingual interpreters. When asked what percentage of their overall work was trilingual, the participants responded<sup>1</sup> :

|    |        |     |      |     |    |        |    |
|----|--------|-----|------|-----|----|--------|----|
| <5 | 10-15% | 20% | 95%* | 10% | 5% | 30-40% | <5 |
|----|--------|-----|------|-----|----|--------|----|

English is not my first language. All of the credentials/certifications are in English. I need those KSAs in English to improve and someday get certified. A bilingual ASL/EN mentor won't understand my challenges and the work my brain has to do to understand English. That's a fear I have that keeps me from taking steps towards certification. Even when we have the KSAs, the language barrier deters us.- P3 ”

<sup>1</sup>The participant who indicated that 95% of their overall work was trilingual primarily works as a VRS interpreter assisting Spanish-speaking callers. The participant reporting 30-40% interprets Spanish classes at a university, Latino-themed events in nightlife settings, along with religious contexts such as church services in Spanish.

# Common Themes

## Language Acquisition and Education

The participants' responses unveiled several common themes related to language acquisition and education within the context of trilingual sign language interpreting.

### Impact of Formal Training vs. Informal Learning:

Distinct preferences emerged regarding the mode of training and its impact. Some participants who underwent formal instruction in academic settings (ITP-trained) emphasized how the structured approach, theoretical knowledge, and exposure to diverse scenarios contributed to a well-rounded skill set. They also highlighted the positive impact of their formal training on their language confidence and trilingual interpreting.

Conversely, those with grassroots, community-based learning experiences (informal training) highlighted the practical, hands-on aspects and real-world applicability of their training. The hands-on nature of learning in informal contexts cultivates a different type of confidence grounded in the ability to navigate diverse sociolinguistic environments.



“ Learning in informal contexts allowed me to directly engage with diverse communities and real-world situations, which enhanced my ability to adapt and perform confidently in more formal trilingual interpreting settings. – P3 ”

# Unique Challenges for Non-Certified Interpreters:

Non-certified interpreters shared common challenges such as financial constraints, limited access to trilingual mentors, and a scarcity of diverse instructors empathetic to the experiences of trilingual interpreters. These challenges impact their language confidence and active pursuit of certification.

“

Financial constraints make it difficult to invest in formal interpreter training, which often requires substantial resources. Without certification, it's harder to access higher-paying opportunities. - P5

”

“

Finding trilingual mentors who understand the unique struggles of navigating multiple languages and cultures is like searching for a needle in a haystack. It's a challenge that affects our confidence and hinders our path to certification. - P7

”



## Socioeconomic Factors:

Socioeconomic factors play a crucial role in shaping the deliberate cultivation of linguistic skills and the professional journey of trilingual individuals. Financial constraints often determine the scope of formal training pursued, leading to a reliance on informal learning methods. Given the scarcity of dedicated trilingual interpreter training programs, Trilingual Sign Language Interpreters (TSLIs) frequently assemble various bilingual training sessions focused on different bilingual skill development to match the depth of a single trilingual training. This approach is more expensive and less comprehensive due to the lack of specialized resources in ASL/Spanish/English interpreting. According to participants, the substantial initial costs and limited financial returns contribute to a state of professional stagnation for trilingual interpreters. Combined with a lack of widespread recognition in the field of ASL interpreting, these financial barriers hinder the aspiration for professional advancement. The participants with BEI Advanced Trilingual certification reported a marginal salary increase following the attainment of their trilingual interpreter certification. Those with credentials in both spoken and sign languages also noted limited or no significant return on investment (ROI) beyond personal fulfillment. It is important to note that these certifications come with annual fees and CEU requirements, both incurring additional costs without a substantial financial

“

Financial constraints really dictated how much formal training I could pursue. I couldn't afford a full interpreter training program, so I had to rely a lot on community workshops and self-study resources. It was definitely less comprehensive than a structured program, but it was what I could manage at the time." - P3

”

“

I had to piece together my training from different sources because there weren't many options for trilingual interpreters specifically. It was expensive, and I felt like I was always playing catch-up. Even now, I don't feel like I've had the same level of training as someone who went through a formal program. - P5

”

## Credentials and Professional Fees in Trilingual Interpreting:

In the field of ASL interpreting, anecdotal evidence indicates an assumption that credentialed interpreters should demand higher rates than their non-credentialed counterparts and that trilingual interpreters should charge more than bilingual interpreters due to the added complexity of their work. However, the experiences shared by the participants in this study provide insights into how these notions are not demonstrated in practice.

Contrary to the expectation that credentials significantly influence fee structures, trilingual interpreters in this study revealed a different approach to setting rates. Rather than relying on formal credentials as the primary determinant, these interpreters often base their fees on a combination of factors, including their years of experience, market and geographical demand, and comparisons with what other trilingual interpreters are billing.

I don't see my lack of certification as a barrier to setting fair rates. It's more about understanding the market demand, my experience, and what other trilingual interpreters are charging in similar settings. - P3

For trilingual interpreters, it's not just about the credentials but also about the value we bring based on our experience and the demand for our unique skill set in the market. - P8



Moreover, there is a prevailing belief among trilingual interpreters that their rates should surpass those of bilingual ASL/English interpreters, reflected by the differential/premium charged based on their specialized skill set, even if the encounter is bilingual (for example, ASL<>Spanish).

Fee structures and remuneration lack standardization or uniformity within the ASL interpreting field. Hence, participants' responses yielded varying rationales for fee-setting. While credentials undoubtedly hold value in demonstrating competency, expertise, and an investment in professional development, participants prioritized a broader spectrum of factors when determining professional fees. They attributed pay differentials to a myriad of skills, such as the ability to adeptly navigate power dynamics (i.e., who to interpret first and the subsequent order considering historical linguistic and cultural dominance when working with and being from minoritized communities) and numerous cultural intricacies (cultural sensitivity, varying levels of literacy, Spanish L2-4 users whose L1 is a language of lesser diffusion and not readily accessible/available, and consumers who have experienced language deprivation) concurrently. The participants also highlighted the intricate landscape of ethics within multilingual and multicultural environments, where differing (often conflicting) codes of conduct necessitate nuanced ethical decision-making processes.

"Trilingual interpreting requires a unique set of skills and language abilities, so it's reasonable to charge a premium for our services. We're providing a specialized service that goes beyond what bilingual interpreters offer." - P5

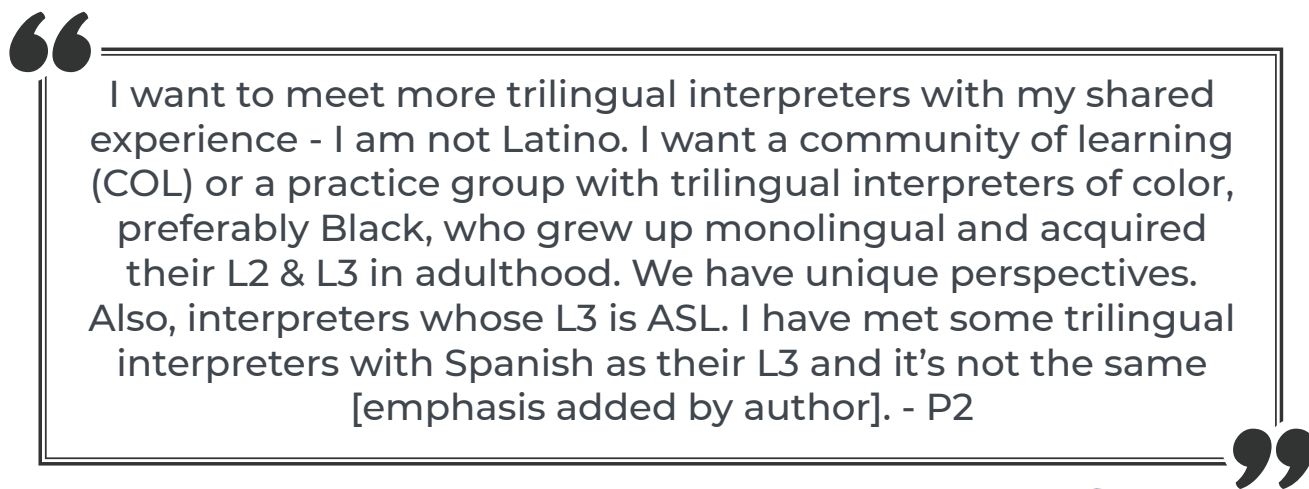
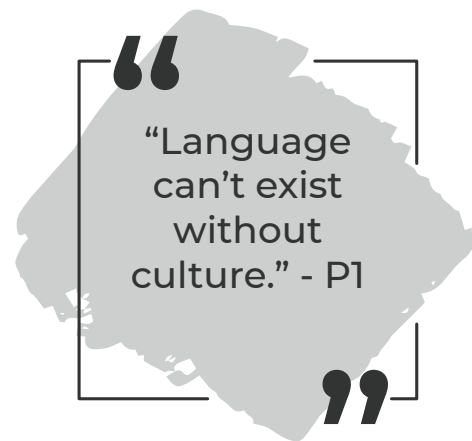
I understand the argument for charging more as a trilingual interpreter, but sometimes it's challenging to justify significantly higher rates, especially in bilingual encounters where only two languages are actively used. - P7



## Importance of Cultural Sensitivity in Education:

Cultural nuances play a pivotal role in language acquisition and education (Yang, 2023). According to Vasilachi (2018), “Language is not merely a tool for communication but a social practice shaping experiences and negotiating identities.” Participant 1 highlighted the importance of culture in language.

Participant 2 emphasized the necessity for culturally sensitive training tailored to interpreters like themselves, who acquired Spanish as a second language. They highlighted the stark contrast between their language acquisition experience as an L2 Spanish user and that of TSLIs who grew up speaking Spanish as their first language. This distinction underscores the need for comprehensive training programs to address these diverse backgrounds. Specifically, Participant 3 emphasized the importance of instruction that acknowledges the unique challenges L2 Spanish users face when navigating sociolinguistic environments effectively. This highlights the need for training programs to provide nuanced support that recognizes and accommodates the differing linguistic journeys of trilingual interpreters.





“My experience as an L2 Spanish user differs from those TSLIs who grew up speaking Spanish as their first language. It significantly influences my interpreting practice, especially in understanding the nuances of cultural and linguistic dynamics.” - P6

“Being an L2 Spanish user has its challenges in trilingual interpreting. It’s not just about language proficiency but also understanding the cultural subtleties that native speakers might take for granted.” - P4

Regardless of training backgrounds, participants unanimously stressed the importance of continuous learning and ongoing professional development. Participants universally acknowledged the complexity and richness of trilingual settings where ASL, English, and Spanish intersect. According to the participants, the ability to seamlessly navigate these linguistic intersections is paramount for effective communication in diverse interpreting contexts. This reflected a commitment to staying abreast of evolving language norms, interpreting techniques, and multicultural competencies. Three out of eight participants explicitly advocated for education programs that incorporate experiential learning opportunities, mentorship initiatives, and exposure to diverse linguistic and cultural contexts. They highlighted the need for curricula that address the unique challenges trilingual sign language interpreters face.

## Language Confidence and Multilingualism:

A recurring theme was language confidence, with participants emphasizing the importance of feeling assured and proficient in all three languages. Confidence is a dynamic attribute that evolves through exposure, practice, and ongoing learning.

Participants exhibited varying degrees of confidence in each language, reflecting the influence of individual strengths, exposure, and formal/informal training backgrounds. While some expressed equal confidence across all three languages, others identified certain languages where they feel more proficient.

Examining participants' data showed that the TSLIs' confidence levels varied significantly across their working languages. For instance, one participant, whose first language is English, expressed higher confidence in conceptualizing English compared to Spanish or ASL. This aligns with the notion of linguistic dominance (Gollan et al., 2012), where individuals tend to feel more proficient in their native language.

Furthermore, two participants who underwent formal interpreter training reported more balanced proficiency across all three languages. One participant (L1 English), who received formal education in Spanish at the high school and university level and completed two Interpreter Training Programs (ITPs), reported feeling confident in both English and Spanish interpreting, likely attributed to the structured curriculum and exposure to diverse language contexts provided by the program.

Conversely, another participant, who had not received formal interpreter training and relied on community immersion for ASL acquisition, expressed greater confidence from ASL to spoken language compared to when Spanish or English was the source language. This highlights the importance of exposure to diverse linguistic communities and settings in shaping interpreters' confidence levels.

Moreover, participants' experiences in trilingual settings also impacted their confidence. One participant, who frequently works in religious, medical, and educational trilingual settings, expressed confidence in managing linguistic fluidity and code-switching dynamics. In contrast, another participant, who encounters trilingual settings less frequently, reported challenges in maintaining equal proficiency across all three languages.

These examples underscore the complex interplay of factors influencing trilingual interpreters' confidence levels, including linguistic dominance, formal training, exposure to diverse linguistic contexts, and frequency of trilingual work. For example, Participant 6 stated, "I consider myself to be a trilingual interpreter, but I don't/won't promote myself as such" due to their insecurity about their command of Spanish and foregrounding that particular skill set. Addressing disparities in confidence requires tailored support and training initiatives that consider each interpreter's unique background and challenges. By providing targeted resources and opportunities for skill development, stakeholders can empower trilingual interpreters to navigate diverse language settings more confidently and proficiently.

“We all have different levels of Spanish fluency that are directly tied to our identities and can be a source of trauma or shame for trilingual interpreters that influences the jobs that we take. - P1”

“For those trilingual interpreters whose L1 is not English, there are additional hurdles. - P5”

# Language Acquisition and Interpreter Confidence in Healthcare Settings

Participants were asked during the interviews to rate their confidence level in healthcare settings verbally on a scale from one to five (1 = minimal confidence, 5 = high confidence) in each of their working language pairs.

(1-5: Minimal to High Confidence)

| Language Pairs & Order of Language Acquisition | L1: Spanish<br>L2: English<br>L3: Other Signed Language<br>L4: ASL | L1: English<br>L2: Spanish<br>L3: ASL | L1: Spanish<br>L2: ASL<br>L3: Other SL<br>L4: Other Sign Language<br>L5: English | L1: Spanish<br>L2: English<br>L3: ASL<br>L4: Other Spoken Language | L1: English<br>L2: Spanish<br>L3: ASL<br>L4: Other Signed Language | L1: English<br>L2: ASL<br>L3: Spanish | L1: Spanish<br>L2: English<br>L3: Other Signed Language<br>L4: ASL | L1: Spanish<br>L2: English<br>L3: ASL |
|--|--|---------------------------------------|--|--|--|---------------------------------------|--|---------------------------------------|
| ASL/SP/EN:                                     | 3.5  | 2.5                                   | 4.8  | 4  | 4  | 2                                     | 3  | 3                                     |
| EN to SP                                       | 5  | 4                                     | 4  | 4  | 3  | 1                                     | 2  | 3                                     |
| SP to EN:                                      | 5  | 4                                     | 3.5  | 2.5  | 3  | 1                                     | 2  | 3                                     |
| ASL to EN                                      | 4  | 3                                     | 4.5  | 3  | 4  | 4                                     | 1  | 4                                     |
| ASL to SP                                      | 5  | 3                                     | 5  | 5  | 3  | 1                                     | 3  | 3                                     |
| EN to ASL                                      | 4  | 3                                     | 5  | 4  | 4  | 4                                     | 1  | 4                                     |
| SP to ASL                                      | 5  | 3                                     | 5  | 5  | 4  | 2                                     | 3  | 4                                     |

Participants touched on various aspects of healthcare interpretation, highlighting issues such as terminology comprehension, navigating complex medical jargon, and ensuring accurate communication between healthcare providers and patients. However, these discussions often remained on the surface level, lacking deeper exploration into the specific challenges and strategies employed in medical settings.



Participants with English as their first language and possessing medical certifications such as CMI (Certified Medical Interpreter) or CHI (Certified Healthcare Interpreter) offered more detailed insights into healthcare interpretation. They discussed the intricacies of interpreting in medical contexts, the importance of specialized training, familiarity with medical terminology, and the need for continuous professional development in healthcare.

“ Having a CMI or CHI certification equips interpreters with the necessary skills and knowledge to navigate complex medical encounters. It's not just about language proficiency but also understanding medical procedures, terminology, and ethical considerations. – P7 ”

“ As a certified medical interpreter, I recognize the importance of staying updated with the latest medical practices and terminology. Specialized training and ongoing professional development are essential to providing accurate and effective interpretation in healthcare settings.” – P5 ”

Additionally, they emphasized the significance of cultural competency and sensitivity when interpreting for patients from diverse backgrounds, underscoring the nuanced nature of healthcare interpretation beyond mere linguistic proficiency.

The two participants with CHI and/or CMI credentials emphasized the need for interpreters to possess a deep understanding of cultural norms, beliefs, and practices to facilitate effective communication between healthcare providers and patients from diverse backgrounds. This includes recognizing and navigating cultural differences in communication styles, body language,

“ As a CHI-certified interpreter, I've learned that effective healthcare communication extends beyond language proficiency. It requires cultural competency and sensitivity to address the diverse needs of patients. Interpreting in healthcare settings means understanding the cultural context of each patient encounter and navigating sensitive topics with empathy and respect. - P7 ”

and non-verbal cues. Interpreters must also demonstrate empathy, compassion, and respect towards patients, ensuring their cultural values and preferences are acknowledged and respected during the interpretation process. Moreover, participants underscored the significance of maintaining professional boundaries and confidentiality while interpreting sensitive medical information, highlighting the ethical responsibilities inherent in healthcare interpretation. These skills are essential for ensuring accurate, culturally competent, and patient-centered interpretation services in healthcare settings.

# Overcoming Challenges in Trilingual Interpreting:

Participants in the study reported encountering various notable challenges inherent to trilingual settings, including navigating code-switching dynamics, managing linguistic fluidity, and striving for parity in proficiency across all languages involved. Code-switching dynamics pose a significant challenge for trilingual interpreters, requiring them to delicately balance transitioning between languages while ensuring clarity and coherence in communication. Participants emphasized the complexity of code-switching in trilingual settings, where they must adeptly switch between languages based on context, audience, and the nuances of each language. They illustrated challenges such as understanding different variants of Spanish and recognizing varying dialects and their associated cultural nuances.

Managing linguistic fluidity also emerged as a prominent concern, with interpreters highlighting the constant need to practice and engage with their working languages to prevent language erosion. Exposure to diverse language communities was noted as beneficial in staying attuned to language trends and evolving idiomatic expressions. Finally, achieving parity in proficiency across all languages was underscored as an ongoing endeavor, with participants emphasizing the importance of honing skills in each language to provide accurate interpretation. For instance, one participant cited their experience in ASL/English interpreting as foundational to their confidence in trilingual settings, highlighting the necessity for balanced proficiency across all languages involved in interpretation. Participants shared strategies for overcoming these challenges and bolstering their confidence in dynamic multilingual environments.



# Summary of Missing Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities Identified:

## Knowledge:

- **High Register Vocabulary:** Two participants expressed a need for a more extensive vocabulary, particularly in high-register contexts. This includes linguistic range and the ability to handle specialized terminology in medical and mental health settings.
- **Understanding Cultural Variations:** Three participants identified gaps in their knowledge regarding cultural variations in the Spanish language. Recognizing different dialects, variations, and associated cultural nuances is crucial for effective trilingual interpretation.
- **Scenarios and Expectations:** One participant highlighted the need for knowledge about potential scenarios and expectations when working as a trilingual interpreter. This includes understanding the dynamics of trilingual assignments and best practices in various settings.



## Skills:

- **Language Negotiation:** Two participants expressed a desire to enhance their language negotiation skills, emphasizing the importance of clarification and ensuring effective communication between parties in trilingual interactions.
- **Sight Translating:** One participant identified a need to improve sight translating into Spanish, indicating a skill gap in handling real-time translation scenarios, especially from English into Spanish.
- **Collaboration Skills:** Two participants suggested a need for improved collaboration skills, particularly in organizing more events and spaces for trilingual interpreters. Strengthening collaborative efforts contributes to a supportive professional community.

## Abilities:

- **Confidence:** Three participants identified a need for increased confidence. They highlighted building confidence in interpreting from ASL to Spanish or English (voicing), managing ethical decisions, and handling the cultural implications of interpreting from different regions as crucial abilities.
- **Switching Between Languages:** One participant expressed a desire to switch between working languages seamlessly. This ability is essential for trilingual interpreters to navigate diverse linguistic contexts effectively.
- **Cultural Mediation:** One participant indicated a need to enhance cultural mediation abilities. This involves recognizing and managing cultural differences, especially between Puerto Rican and mainland U.S. cultural contexts.



# Factors that Contribute to **KSA** Deficits

Several factors contribute to deficits in the Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities (KSAs) of trilingual interpreters. Knowledge gaps arise from insufficient exposure to trilingual settings, scenarios, and situations, compounded by the absence of proper accountability and screening measures for trilingual interpreters by agencies and hiring entities. This lack of exposure extends to the diversity of Spanish languages, dialects, and cultures. Skills deficits encompass challenges in quick language processing, effective management of encounters, and confidence in navigating different linguistic registers.

## Participant Concerns:

Participants in the study voiced several concerns regarding the landscape of trilingual interpreting, encompassing advocacy for qualified interpreters, tokenization and stereotyping, challenges in skill development, and mental health and well-being. Advocacy for qualified trilingual interpreters emerged as a prominent issue, with participants highlighting the risk posed by unqualified bilingual interpreters taking trilingual assignments. They emphasized the importance of agencies prioritizing qualified trilingual interpreters and implementing mechanisms for checks and balances to prevent community harm. Tokenization and stereotyping also surfaced as significant challenges, with interpreters expressing frustration at being reduced to checkboxes rather than recognized for their skills. Skill development presented its own set of obstacles, particularly in areas like sight translating into Spanish and smoothly transitioning between all three working languages. Additionally, concerns regarding mental health and well-being were evident, as participants shared anxieties about the unknown, fear of tests, and the need for emotional and mental support, indicating that interpreters may grapple with challenges beyond technical skills in the trilingual interpreting profession.





“I know my worth and the value of the work that we do” - P8



“Bilingual interpreters need to stop taking trilingual work and refer it to qualified trilingual interpreters. At minimum, offer it to certified/qualified trilingual interpreters first. This will add value to the only trilingual certification available on a national level.” - P4

“It’s less about challenges and deficits that exist. It’s more about building resilience and skills to overcome those challenges and deficits. That allows an interpreter to give the best of what they have to offer in spite of their limitations. Introspection and the ability to articulate choices, decisions, and options.” - P2

The study participants highlighted three significant challenges: isolation, lack of vetting, and the desire for recognition and support within the interpreting profession. For some participants, isolation was a tangible reality, as they found themselves to be the sole trilingual interpreter in their areas. This isolation raised concerns about the absence of a community of peers and the potential impact on their professional development. Moreover, participants expressed frustration over the lack of vetting processes for trilingual interpreters, highlighting the need for standardized qualifications and quality assurance measures to ensure competence and safeguard the interests of both interpreters and the communities they serve. In addition to addressing these structural issues, participants mentioned the importance of recognition, support, and increased opportunities for trilingual interpreters. They articulated a desire for a more inclusive and supportive professional environment that acknowledges their unique skills and contributions, paving the way for greater professional growth and advancement in the field of interpreting.

## Helpful Resources Identified:

Participants in the study emphasized the significance of their educational background, acknowledging the value of formal education in Interpreter Training Programs (ITP) and language courses. While structured courses like American Sign Language (ASL) classes were beneficial, some participants found specialized programs focused on trilingual interpreting particularly valuable. Many highlighted the pivotal role of immersion experiences and community involvement in laying the groundwork for their skill development. Peer and colleague networks emerged as critical sources of support, with participants emphasizing the importance of local, national, and international connections with trilingual interpreter colleagues. Group chats and forums were noted as safe spaces for sharing experiences and insights.

Additionally, trilingual organizations like Mano a Mano were recognized as valuable resources. There was a collective call for more comprehensive trilingual interpreter training, including mentorship programs and exposure to diverse settings. Participants cited guidance manuals and publications such as Myers & Lawyer's Trilingual Guidance as helpful resources. Personal and professional cultural exposure was deemed essential, with participants emphasizing engagement with Deaf, Latinx Deaf & Hearing, Spanish-speaking/using, and trilingual interpreter communities. Cultural competence and sensitivity were highlighted, particularly in recognizing variations in language use and cultural nuances.

“I am grateful for the individuals and groups that provide a safe space for trilingual interpreters. I would be a different interpreter without them. Many trilingual interpreters before me have sacrificed a lot to get to where we are today” - P2

“One big challenge is managing ethical approaches and decision-making here in the U.S. compared to Puerto Rico (cultural implications; Latinos = strong community, helper - collectivism vs individualism) - P7



## Recommendations for Interpreter Training:

Participants collectively recommend that interpreter training programs incorporate strategies to enhance confidence in trilingual settings. They unanimously expressed the need for an Interpreter Training Program (ITP) specifically tailored for trilingual interpreters. They also underscored the importance of continuous exposure to diverse trilingual environments, advocating for proactive immersion to cultivate a deeper understanding and ease in navigating various linguistic contexts and registers, particularly in engaging with Latinx Deaf individuals representing diverse countries, each with unique language use and preferences. Additionally, participants emphasized the necessity of developing proficiency in code-switching to enable seamless transitions between languages and registers tailored to the communicative needs of the participants. They stressed the significance of ongoing professional development in order to remain current with language norms, interpreter techniques, and multicultural competencies. Moreover, participants highlighted the value of mentorship opportunities, acknowledging the importance of learning from experienced trilingual interpreters while expressing a desire to avoid exploiting their knowledge.

Finally, they advocated for real-world practice, emphasizing the importance of hands-on experiences to apply theoretical knowledge and build practical confidence in diverse sociolinguistic environments.

Trilingual interpreters recognize the importance of networking and community engagement, actively participating in professional networks, interpreter organizations, and community-based groups. These platforms provide opportunities to connect with peers, share experiences, and collectively overcome challenges. Additionally, interpreters prioritize language-specific skill-building efforts, focusing on enhancing proficiency in each language individually to address specific language challenges and ensure confidence in all three languages.

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We have the desire to learn more but at the same time we want to avoid taking advantage of the knowledge holders - P8

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“

“Receptively, my brain still defaults to Spanish” - P7

“The BEI’s Test of English Proficiency (TEP) is hard, even for native English speakers. The ITP I attended paired non-L1 English-speaking students with a mentor to specifically work on the challenges the TEP presented.” - P5

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Trilingual interpreters often have their own perceptions of which Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities are crucial for navigating trilingual settings. However, these perceptions may not always align with the KSAs they actually possess.



# Conclusion

This study has effectively addressed the research questions, which sought to develop a tangible list of knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) deemed critical for effective trilingual interpreting by eight participants with varied social, economic, educational, and professional trajectories. Through in-depth individual interviews, common themes emerged that not only elucidated a tangible list of essential KSAs, but also shed light on those KSAs that are often overlooked, oversimplified, or overly-generalized. This helps to contribute to our understanding of the field and this particular specialization coupled with its impact on TSLI self-image and self-esteem. For instance, participants delved into the intricate process of multi-lingual/modal/cultural code-switching, sharing personal experiences where they grappled with distinguishing between different Spanish dialects, and other variations of languages used in Spanish-speaking countries based on context. These findings are in alignment with Treviño, Ortiz, & Quinto-Pozos' (2022) definition of trilingual interpreters wherein they must learn about the varieties of Spanish outside of their own (p.3).

This research holds particular relevance amidst a scarcity of specialized studies specifically focused on trilingual (ASL/Spanish/English) interpreters, especially in the context of post-pandemic shifts that have drastically shifted the skill set required to work effectively in an evolving digital landscape, paving the way for tailored training programs and a reform of professional standards; which for trilingual interpreters historically has yet to be nationally accepted beyond those adopted by ASL/English interpreters in the US. Practical recommendations stemming from this research advocate for the integration of real-world practices into training programs and the cultivation of collaborative peer networks to support trilingual interpreters in navigating the complexities of their profession.

Moving forward, the insights gleaned from this study provide a step towards developing a roadmap for advancing professionalism in trilingual (ASL/Spanish/English) interpreting, promoting inclusive culturally-responsive communication access, and driving positive industry transformations. The findings advocate for targeted support, industry and community-wide recognition, and collaborative efforts to address the KSAs required to work effectively, as well as the current gaps that need to be addressed and remediated, within the specialization. The participants' voices echo a call for a more inclusive and knowledge-sharing community that uplifts trilingual interpreters and strengthens their vital role in facilitating effective communication across diverse linguistic and cultural contexts.

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