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Dawn M. Wessling
Faculty

Suzanne Ehrlich

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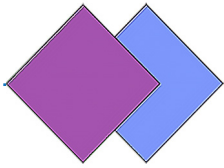
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A Survey of Language Shaming Experiences in Interpreter Education

Dawn M. Wessling¹

University of North Florida, Jacksonville, Florida, USA

Suzanne Ehrlich

University of North Florida, Jacksonville, Florida, USA

Abstract

Problems of practice (Henriksen & Richardson, 2017) are the impetus for change across many disciplines and result in a myriad of solutions toward best practices. Teaching American Sign Language/English interpreting is no different than other genres in higher education in seeking continuous improvement. Signed language interpreters in teaming situations may engage in self- and peer critique in the process of creating an interpretation (Russell, 2011). As a result, interpreters are cognizant of corrections they may receive from their peers, whether new to the field or long-term practitioners. The action of being monitored by peers and the related behavior are not always exhibited in ways that are informed by best practices. Previous research has documented unhealthy feedback practices as a type of horizontal violence (Ott, 2012). The practice of negative behavior results in disrupted learning spaces and could be compounded by a lack of awareness by the participants. The current study examined language shaming in interpreter education from the perspective of the student who experienced the shaming behavior and who also may have engaged in shaming activities. The results have implications for both language and interpreting teachers in devising constructive feedback techniques that better support the learner.

Keywords: language shaming, interpreting, ASL, language learning, language prestige, interpreter education

1 Correspondence to: dawn.m.wessling@unf.edu

A Survey of Language Shaming Experiences in Interpreter Education

Language attitudes, language prestige, and ideologies exist in all dimensions of our lives and influence us whether we are interpreters, translators, or typical language users in a community (Dueñas González & Melis, 2000; Reagan, 2012; Ricento, 2006; Spolsky, 2004). Be it through print, online, or face-to-face, we study the world around us and the language used within various real and virtual spaces to determine accuracy, status, and any manner of categorizations that serve to identify others' place within an interaction. Language attitudes, including linguicism, have been at the center of linguistics research for decades (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2012). Often, pedagogy may be influenced by problems of practice in the classroom (Henriksen & Richardson, 2017). Point in fact, the impetus for this study was an observation during a classroom interaction with American Sign Language/English interpreting students. While lecturing in American Sign Language during a class with upper-level interpreting students, one of the authors was corrected in their use of a particular sign for a concept by a student. The use of the sign by the professor was done more as a “play on signs” rather than as any erroneous use or variation of American Sign Language. Nonetheless, the “correction” stuck with the professor and incited a period of reflection on student behaviors around corrective language behavior toward others. In a subsequent class meeting, the instructor disseminated an informal survey to this same group of students to gauge their understanding of shaming activities related to language proficiency. This was the first step toward opening dialogue with students and faculty around the idea of *language shaming*.

The emergence of digital environments and the proliferation of social media have brought more attention to language and provided new opportunities to interact and communicate. More specific to the field of interpreter education, students, faculty, and deaf community members are now connected in ways that did not exist in previous decades. Historically, people using signed languages were limited to face-to-face community events. With the advent of video-based technology, this is no longer the case, as people using signed language may now engage with others from around the globe.

With language acquisition and cultural values as two of the pillars of interpreting practice, this study explored how students perceived and experienced language in their learning experiences, and specifically how students may or may not have experienced language shaming in their language development. *Language shaming* is defined by the authors as the act of correcting language to assert power or superiority rather than for the sake of continuous improvement or constructive feedback. This definition was derived from the participant responses within this research study. Language shaming, which is not owned by the authors, is a new area of research, but the notion of speaking negatively about another's language based on power, prestige, and ideologies has been well documented (Dueñas González & Melis, 2000; Reagan, 2010; Ricento, 2006; Spolsky, 2004).

This study gathered data via a 12-question survey sent to students in interpreter education programs across the United States with the aim of identifying participants' perception of the concept of language shaming and motivating or influencing factors regarding this phenomenon (n = 118). This study sought to expand the concept of language shaming related to how ASL/English interpreting students described this term based on their observations and personal experiences. This research explored how these attitudes exist in this community of learners and expanded the ways in which language shaming may negatively affect learning environments among emerging signers of interpreting programs.

Literature Review

Language Policy

Reagan (2010) critically examined the need to develop language policy and planning for educational settings that use American Sign Language. Importantly, the decision to teach one language over another implies significance of the language being taught and, concurrently, prestige related to the language. While Reagan's study focused on the education of students who are deaf, it remains relevant in that it focused on the use of American Sign Language as the language to teach students and outlined the stages for development of a formal policy. The types of language planning outlined include status planning, corpus planning, acquisition planning, and attitude planning. *Status planning* typically creates a hierarchy of languages, with some being considered more correct than others. As an aside, status planning related to American Sign Language often includes efforts to “prove” that it is a natural language and to have it recognized as such in formal legislature. *Corpus planning* relates to standardized texts (print or video) that serve as a formal record of the language. *Acquisition planning* has two aspects that include possible variations for how the language will be taught to deaf and, conversely, to nondeaf signers. *Attitude planning* involves the development

or adjustment of the attitude that individuals or groups have about a language or toward multiple languages. This last type of planning also relates to the attitude that a community may have about a signed language, which can include incorrect and/or negative judgments (Hill, 2012). As Reagan described, all four of these planning types are often engaged in by administrators without the inclusion of those most affected by the planning: the deaf community. This is an example of how language planning and policy has much to do with exacting power (Ricento, 2009, p.19).

Language policy in the United States often centers on the use of English as the official language (Spolsky, 2004). While this is the assertion, English is not formally the official language of the United States. This suggests that individuals might be expected to only use English to communicate, but given the choice, the same individual may prefer to use another language. Therefore, the assumption is that the norm is using English. The language used while interacting with students in an interpreter training program is not standardized and may range from spoken English, to ASL, to a combination of both of these languages (Ehrlich & Wessling, 2017). According to Spolsky (2004), deciding which language that is to be considered the norm in response to a language problem is termed *status-planning*. Status-planning as it relates to signed languages has usually been applied to the design of curricula for the education of deaf children (Reagan, 2010; Spolsky, 2004). The selection or recognition of ASL in schools for the deaf is strongly linked to the communication method or philosophy that is adopted by the educator or institution (Horejes, 2011; Reagan, 2010). The teaching philosophy may range from oral-only methods, which ban signed languages, to manual communication methods, which may range from manually coded English to ASL. To further expand, additional factors regarding philosophical methods of education of deaf children range from total communication to the bilingual/bicultural method, which uses ASL as the base language with which to learn all other subject areas, including English. As such, language policies influence the ways in which languages are taught to students. In this case, the focus is on ASL/English interpreting students and how the various language policies may influence the student experience.

Language Ideology

Language ideology is not meant to be a negative categorization of how students view any language; rather, it is a means to identify “ideas, beliefs, principles[,] and values a person has” (Gee, 1990, p.3). In modern American society, the common ideology toward English is that it is the standard language and, therefore, the most prestigious and appropriate language for all speakers. Researchers and linguists suggest that speakers of any language are really speaking an idiolect, with each individual using a version of what is identified as the language (Gumperz, 1971; Reagan, 2010). In other words, language does not exist in one standard form and is in reality a combination of the language varieties of many different speakers (Reagan, 2010). Speakers of English in Kearny, New Jersey, can understand those speaking English in Tulsa, Oklahoma, although the dialects vary and will sound different to each of them.

Diverse ideologies pose challenges when taken in the context of elitism surrounding languages in America (Reagan, 2010; Spolsky, 2004). According to Reagan, “In the U.S. context, there is an unarticulated but nonetheless powerful hierarchy of languages and language varieties, with varieties of standard (or mainstream) English at the top of the hierarchy” (2010, p.93). Elitists do not typically embrace variation and may look down upon those who speak English differently. The same concept may be applied to those using ASL. The majority of hearing people may perceive English as being the most prestigious, while other languages are seen as being less prestigious. This linguistic concept might lead some hearing people unfamiliar with the deaf community to perceive ASL as less prestigious (Krausneker, 2015; C. Lucas & Valli, 2011).

Language Planning in Interpreter Education

Interpreter education does not typically include any systematic language planning beyond the course sequence for ASL learning prior to beginning interpreting skills courses. Furthermore, many of the interpreting courses are not designed in collaboration with signed language faculty (see Bowen, 2008; Monikowski, 2017; Sawyer, 2004). In the U.S., students typically learn ASL through a series of courses aimed at conversational fluency with a beginning, intermediate, and advanced level of curriculum. Ironically, interpreter educators continue to lament the lack of fluency in ASL of interpreting students, and students continue to enter the field without a practitioner level of readiness. There are two parts to the language-planning concept: the first includes the selection or support of a language, and the second is the implementation of that language within the learning environment. Applying the two-part system of language planning to the education of interpreting students may facilitate a renewed philosophy regarding interpreter pedagogy and the language of instruction.

Shaming Activities

Shame is a response by an individual as a result of an external judgment or pressure from an outside influence (Lo & Fung, 2011, p.170). In general, shaming behaviors have been linked to being punitive and educative and as something that individuals seek to avoid experiencing again or use as the catalyst for restructuring behavior (Leach & Cidam, 2015). Interpreting students may experience embarrassment in their perceived lack of fluency, especially when others observe their signing. Language shaming may occur in the students' environments from peers, their instructors, or the wider community. While not directed specifically toward interpreting, Leach and Cidam's (2015) meta-analysis of responses to shaming found that the level of reparability of a shame-causing event was positively correlated with a more constructivist approach. Individuals may attempt to adjust their own behavior to avoid performing in ways that caused them to feel shame. This is important in considering how and why students may continue to work to improve their competency in a language when they may have felt shamed by others for their lack of fluency.

Methodology

This article is derived from a 12-question online survey of ASL-English interpreting students distributed via Qualtrics (Qualtrics XM // The Leading Experience Management Software, 2017) to faculty contacts in ASL/English interpreter education programs (IEPs) among all education levels across the United States (see the Appendix). The survey first asked students to define language shaming and then to describe any experiences of language shaming they may have had. In addition to questions about language shaming, basic demographic information, such as age, language history, gender, and ethnicity/race, were also collected to determine variety in the sample population and to ensure that the population was diversified.

Survey Instrument

Convenience sampling resulted in a slight snowball effect for student responses from a variety of ASL/English IEPs. The survey incorporated three open-ended questions that related to the participants' definition of language shaming, the participants' personal reaction to language shaming, and reasons why participants may have engaged in language shaming toward others (see the Appendix, questions 2, 4, and 6). The survey may have been completed by students on their own in a private setting or may have been part of a larger class activity. The start of the survey asked students whether they had heard of the term *language shaming*, and a subsequent question asked students to describe what they thought the term meant. Finally, the survey asked the students to consider with whom and how language shaming had occurred in their own IEP and to describe how language shaming made them feel.

Table 1
Participant Demographics

| Category | n | % |
|------------------------|----|-------|
| White | 97 | 82.91 |
| Black/African American | 7 | 5.98 |
| Native American | 3 | 2.56 |
| Asian American | 2 | 1.71 |
| Hispanic/Latino | 1 | .85 |
| Other | 7 | 5.98 |

Note. Participants could select *Other* but were not required to identify the category in terms of ethnic identity. Some participants entered *multiracial* or *biracial* for the category of *Other*.

Analysis

Aside from descriptive analysis of the participants' demographics, analysis of their responses to questions about language shaming were the primary focus of the data analysis and review. The open-ended responses from the survey were reviewed for emergent themes by using open-coding and identification of terms that related to the concept of language shaming. The rationale for our analysis method was due to the structure of the survey, which allowed participants to describe their understanding of language shaming. As such, we did not define the term but rather allowed the meaning to emerge from the participants' responses. One key piece of data that emerged was the commonality of participants' description of language shaming as an act of *language correction to assert power or superiority over another*. The participant-generated meaning was unlike other definitions of language shaming as defined in our literature review: to mean shaming someone for speaking a certain language or viewing particular languages as being less prestigious than others. Ideas that emerged across multiple participants were grouped into large categories and later combined when the categories were related. As a result of the data analysis, the primary themes that emerged related to language-shaming experiences were *defensive language*, *language prestige*, and *negative internalized emotions*.

Results

The study results suggested that nearly half of the students ($n = 118$) had experienced some form of language shaming during their experiences in an IEP, although most of them (69.49%) had never heard the term before seeing it in the survey. Some descriptive statistics that emerged related to the questions about shaming included the following:

- 48.31% had experienced shaming by others.
- 48.31% had engaged in shaming behaviors toward others.
- Only two respondents selected a signed language as their mother tongue, while the remainder identified English as their mother tongue.

None of these demographics suggested any more likelihood to engage in shaming behavior, as the participants did not reference gender or age when describing shaming activities; they were merely provided for informational purposes.

Themes

Three primary themes emerged from the narrative coding: (a) language prestige, (b) negative internalized emotions, and (c) defensive language. We describe the characteristics of each of the themes in the following sections, with the characteristics and frequency of responses shown in Table 2.

Language Prestige

Participants also described languages in terms that suggested there might be greater individual prestige or self-worth if one were more fluent in certain languages. Also, identifying some languages as being either superior or inferior was a common practice. Participants talked in fairly general terms about language and rarely identified ASL, English, or another language directly when discussing prestige. Participants implied in some of their responses that their fluency in ASL might be judged by others in a way that suggested a higher level of prestige for the language itself. They also talked about the judgment that occurred toward people based on the language they used, such as using spoken English when in the presence of signers or vice versa. Because the chosen language might be criticized, this suggests that certain languages resulted in individuals' feeling discriminated against or experiencing bullying behaviors beyond the initial shaming event.

Negative Internalized Emotions

Many of the participants described negative emotions in response to shaming behaviors. Another area of interest was participants' internalization of the response to shaming. Most of the participants had never used or heard the phrase *language shaming* prior to the survey, suggesting that it is a phenomenon that they were unable to articulate or receive support in confronting. The

participants had not used the term or discussed these behaviors in their IEPs prior to seeing it in the survey. This suggests that it may be a type of implicit or hidden curriculum, as described by McDermid (2009). Of participants who talked about negative internalized emotions ($n = 44$), 31 did not describe confronting the experience outwardly or directly with either the shamer or other supports in their IEP.

Defensive Language

When considering defensive language, participants' responses described engaging in external verbalization toward others who had shamed them or in trying to explain why the language (in this case, ASL) was valid. This suggested that some participants had been shamed for *using* ASL, not just for having less fluency in the language. Other responses around defensive language included specifically defending a sign choice, verbally disagreeing with a correction, and choosing a particular language to use in a given setting.

Table 2
Participant Narratives

| Themes | Characteristics | Frequency |
|--------------------------------|--|-----------|
| Language Prestige | Descriptions of languages as having a hierarchy of legitimacy in social engagements. Judgments about accents or dialects as being less acceptable. Decisions to use one language rather than another. | 38 |
| Negative internalized emotions | Descriptions that included such terms as <i>humiliated</i> , <i>embarrassed</i> , <i>stupid</i> , <i>inadequate</i> , <i>upset</i> , <i>angry</i> , <i>anxious</i> , <i>discouraged</i> , and <i>frustrated</i> in response to having been shamed. | 33 |
| Defensive language | Engaging in disagreements related to the correctness of a sign choice with others. Explaining why ASL is a valid language. Describing one's own knowledge of the language to another person. | 14 |

Note. The themes emerged from participants' open-ended responses to survey questions about how they felt or responded when they had been language shamed by others.

Direction of Shaming

Although 57 respondents indicated in Question 3 that they had been language shamed, 72 later responded to Question 7 by identifying someone shaming them from one of five categories (see the Appendix). This disparity may have been due to the wording of the question. Nonetheless, the responses indicated that the shaming was most often done by peers and then secondly by educators and community members equally. Family and friends were the next group to engage in shaming, and finally strangers or co-workers. The last group was unrelated to respondents' IEP, while the majority of shaming activities happened in direct relation to the education program for interpreting or from the community. Participants were able to identify more than one category of person who shamed and could select any combination of peers, educators, community members, family/friends, and others. The responses for this area included 161 selections. Figure 1 identifies the categories of people engaging in shaming behaviors. Of particular note is that a majority of shaming behavior occurred in *educational interactions* with classmates and/or with educators, totaling 51 of the 72 responses. In other words, 70.8% of the shaming activity happening in educational settings.

Reasons for Shaming

Question 5 asked participants whether they had ever engaged in language-shaming behaviors. In their responses, 48.3% of the participants admitted that they had engaged in language-shaming behaviors toward others. A follow-up open-ended question asked participants to describe the reasons that they might have engaged in shaming behavior. From this open-ended response, five themes emerged: *social influence*, *judging behaviors*, *education*, *habitus*, and *rationalization*. Table 3 gives a summary of some of the types of responses from participants.

Figure 1
Identification of Shame Perpetrators

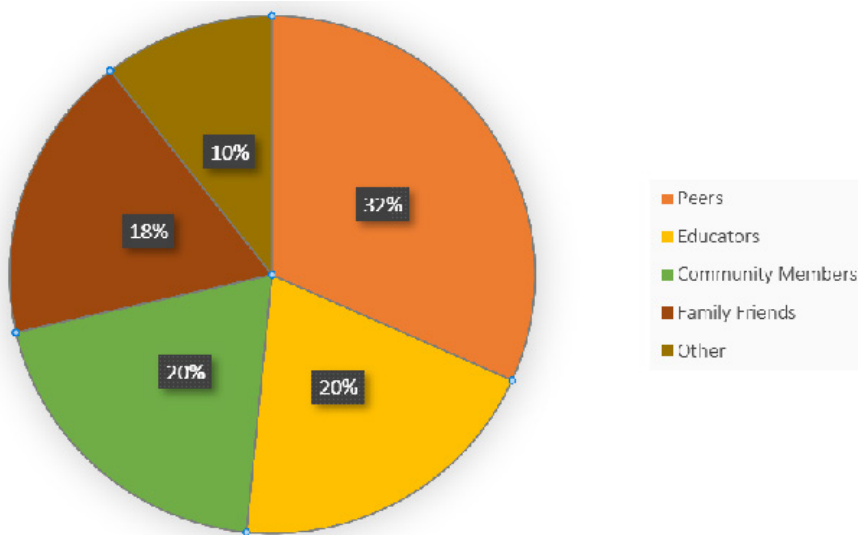


Table 3
Reasons for Shaming

| Category | Example responses |
|-------------------|--|
| Social behaviors | Peer pressure Absorbed from others Group-think Privilege Others did the same |
| Judging behaviors | ASL over signed English Evaluating others skill Improper use of grammar Not using language correctly Tell the correct sign Deaf people using their language improperly Correct English |
| Education | I mean to help Feedback Promote Awareness |
| Habitus | Seemed appropriate in this setting Adopted without thinking Imitating the behavior We are learning pure ASL To fit in |
| Rationalization | Ignorance Unaware I was young Learned from my family Was not intentional I was inexperienced I didn't do it consciously |

Note. Participants often selected reasons across two or three themes, and individual narrative responses were coded to reflect more than one theme ($n = 73$).

Social Influence

Participants described instances when they had majority privilege and might have shamed because of discrimination as a majority-language member. They may have also engaged in lateral discrimination within their own language group. Some also suggested feeling peer pressure from others and adopting a group-think mentality (Janis, 2008) about how others use language in society. Participants described a tendency to undervalue the use of other languages and to emulate the shaming behaviors of others, with one student suggesting that they were “influenced by peers and majority culture into taking part in discriminatory behaviors” **in their educational program of study.**

Judging Behaviors

Somewhat related to the concepts of language prestige in Table 2, participants also identified making judgments about the fluency of others and to the prestige related to being perceived as having greater fluency in a language. Furthermore, they also described policing the language of others and criticizing peers’ language use by directly correcting sign production or word pronunciation. One student talked about their behavior of “critically evaluating another’s skills because some have been allowed to pass classes they should have failed.” Another described learning “pure ASL and then seeing Deaf people use their own language improperly.” This suggests that a certain degree of license has been given, either informally or formally, that encourages students to evaluate others’ language proficiency despite not being experts themselves in language acquisition or linguistics.

To Educate

A third area of discussion by the participants was the idea that the corrections or shaming events were part of the wider community of learning practice. Obviously, in any language learning environment, feedback is an important component to increase student fluency. In some cases, the corrections may have been delivered with the intent to educate but were not perceived in the same way. One participant talked about the difficulty in discussing “others signing ability without involving language proficiency.” Another talked about the desire to help another, “but that it does not always come out right.”

Habitus

Another area of interest was the idea that the shaming behavior was considered to be appropriate for the setting and a somewhat embodied disposition of the IEP and possibly the community (see also Bourdieu, 1991). Participants described imitating the behaviors of those around them, and one identified shaming others, but that it “seemed like appropriate behavior.” One other participant stated that they were “so used to being language shamed that I tend to exhibit the same behavior I notice others using towards me.”

Rationalized

Finally, when confirming their own shaming activities, several participants rationalized the behavior by stating that it was something they were unaware of or had learned from others, and thus it was unconscious. Some stated that it was inadvertent or unintentional or that they did not consider the impact of their behavior on others. One participant confirmed that they had shamed others but also stated that “I would never have done so on purpose.”

Discussion

While some questions have arisen in our analysis of these results, of certainty is that language shaming happened to approximately half of the interpreting students in this study in relation to their IEP. Language shaming, as self-reported and defined by the students, occurred from peer-to-peer, from educators, and, less often, from the community. More interesting, a definition of language shaming was not provided, but instead we asked students whether they had experienced language shaming. Hauland and Holmström (2019) defined *language shaming* in two ways (Pillar, 2017): to disparage or demean someone based on their

particular use of a language or limitations and lack of resources from the government based on language. The notion that students would be able to identify with this concept without a formal definition provided us with enough data to prototype our own definition. As a result of this study, we now define *language shaming* as a negative act or response by one person directed at another as a means of projecting approval or dislike for the other person's language production. Furthermore, the act of shaming may serve to exhibit power or superiority by the shamer over the one shamed.

While students reported a myriad of challenges related to language shaming, questions remain as to what language shaming means and how it may affect interpreting students and the pedagogy of language and interpreter education. This study provided a prototype for examining language shaming in the context of interpreter education and could be extended to better understand how these actions are perceived by all stakeholders. This study also provided an aspect of language interaction that must be further examined to identify its impact on the motivation, retention, and development of students in IEPs. The results of this study have brought to light more questions as a result of the responses. While not all questions can be answered, the following sections attempt to highlight some of the limitations and suggest areas of future research.

Limitations

This study had several limitations in that the results were derived via a self-report survey. Respondents may have answered in ways that were complimentary to their own behaviors rather than what might be witnessed in a live setting. The sample size, although not exceptionally small, might yield different results with a larger population of student participants. Additionally, the survey was only distributed in the U.S. Collecting data from a global context could add further interpretations and understanding to the themes proposed in the study. Furthermore, the study participants represented only nondeaf participants. Replication of the study with deaf interpreters could identify themes not identified in the current set of data.

After careful review, the authors considered the physical locations in which the surveys were distributed and the lack of diverse representation in the sample size (i.e., few BIPOC, LGBTQ, and deaf participants). The survey may have been distributed in classrooms by faculty, and, with this, marginalized students may have feared retribution for reporting shaming activity in the presence of instructors, thus influencing their responses. There is no known incidence of this occurring, only reflection of post-survey analysis that leads us to consider other, more anonymous, and equitable methods of distribution in future research studies.

Lastly, expanded qualitative research methods (e.g., interviews, reflections, and focus groups) would provide greater insight into the *why* and *how* of the data presented in this study. While open-ended questions provided rich data, the authors acknowledge the potential to expand the study even further.

Future Research

Several areas might be considered for future studies, include interpreter educator preparation, peer mentoring preparation, and incorporation of heritage signers who are deaf and nondeaf (Boeh, 2016). One of the notable questions and considerations from the researchers included ideas around the metalinguistics of language learning. At this time, there is a dearth of literature about language shaming and few ways to describe the experience.

Because the impetus for this study included teacher observations in a classroom setting where there was peer-to-peer shaming, the idea that students may not have the background or awareness to provide constructive guidance must be considered. The need to better prepare students to provide constructive feedback may be warranted. Furthermore, because students reported experiencing shaming behaviors from educators, the pedagogy of interpreter educators bears consideration for how they are prepared to teach the next generation of interpreters.

Peer mentoring practice should be evaluated in the case that it may perpetuate shaming behaviors as individuals move from the classroom into the interpreting field. For practitioners, the goal of any interpreted interaction is to produce a dynamically equivalent message (Nida, 1964). When the message is being produced by more than one interpreter working in partnership, the rapport between the interpreters must include a certain level of trust and respect. There remains a challenge in understanding how the interaction between a team of interpreters may support or, conversely, perpetuate shaming behaviors.

Another area that remains to be examined includes shaming behaviors that may be present in heritage signing populations that include children of deaf adults (CODAs) and the deaf community. This current study included a small population of heritage signers, so it would not be possible to draw conclusions from these limited responses. Future research should focus on this population and include hearing heritage signers and deaf people. Of interest would also be the experiences of deaf people learning a spoken/written language (in our case, English) to see whether they have parallel shaming events in their history of language learning. Further, it bears consideration that interpreters and consumers may also engage in shaming activities in their

interactions with one another. Finally, language shaming should be examined in terms of language modality and whether it is likely to elicit behaviors that rise to the level of shaming.

Lastly, with a rapid shift to digital lives, it would also be valuable to examine how the disinhibition effect (Best, 2016; Suler, 2004) may play a role in the development of language-shaming behaviors. With the increase in social media usage and online interactions via distance learning, language shaming may also be effectively reinforced via distancing through technology. By identifying and comparing these online events to classroom or face-to-face interactions, greater connections may be found that would further our understanding of when, where, and why language shaming may occur. Certainly, reducing negative associations with language learning will improve the experience of student interpreters and result in better teaching practices within IEPs.

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