Qualified: What next?

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Content

The development of quality standards in signed language interpreting: A European perspective

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Abstract

The current state of quality standards in signed language interpreting in Europe constitutes a complex interrelationship between professional qualifications, training programmes, and quality assurance mechanisms. Signed language interpreting as a service profession should work towards achieving greater consumer–driven quality assurance (Dean and Pollard Jr., 2005). Quality assurance is essential for interpreter consumers and practitioners, but the perspectives on interpretation quality differ between stakeholders (Wit and Sluis, 2014; Haug et al., 2017; Kurz and Hill, 2018; Wit, Crasborn and Napier, 2023). Drawing on multiple samples of longitudinal studies conducted between 2000–2024, this article brings together an overview of the perspectives on quality interpreting standards from deaf signers, interpreter practitioners, training institutions, and professional organisations. Presented at the European Forum of Sign Language Interpreters (efsli) 2024 conference in Italy, the overview is further illustrated with the audience perspectives conducted via a live interactive questionnaire. The aim of the presentation and this article is not to give an exhaustive overview on interpreting quality, but to serve as an inspiration for further reflections and discussions on the essence of signed language interpreting quality. Importantly, the findings of the presented studies highlight the critical importance of establishing robust qualification frameworks while acknowledging and addressing the unique challenges resulting from signed languages being minority languages in professional contexts.

Keywords

Sign language interpreting, quality standards, professional development, interpreter training, Europe, deaf communities, minority languages, professional qualifications

1. Introduction

The path to becoming a signed language interpreter in Europe is not straightforward. An aspiring signed language interpreter should be able to determine which route to take to ensure that they can meet a professional recognised standard. There are multiple options to become an interpreter which vary by country, and sometimes even within a country. These options range from ad hoc courses and university degree programmes to accreditation tests and registration systems, or a combination thereof (Wit, 2020b). There is no uniformity in the professional and quality standards of signed language interpreting, not at European level and not even at the national level. This maze of options may create the illusion that

quality standards in signed language interpreting are of lesser importance.

However, to guarantee a quality provision, common requirements in the form of standards are needed to guide the professional service provider as well as the users of this service. Based on several of my studies, I bring together in this article the various perspectives on quality in signed language interpreting and how interpreters can aspire to further professional quality standards. Ultimately, signed language interpreters have a professional responsibility to service the consumers to the best of their possibilities by individually and collectively raising their profession to a higher quality standard.

This article takes stock of the current state of quality assurance in the sign language interpreter profession and outlines the importance and challenges of quality standards in Europe. In addition, the components of quality standards from different perspectives are presented, as well as the available educational opportunities and quality assurance mechanisms. These components are further illustrated with the collected perspectives of the European Forum of Sign Language Interpreters (efsli) 2024 conference participants. The article concludes with recommendations on next possible steps in quality assurance in signed language interpreting in Europe.

2.   Setting Professional Standards

Setting quality standards in signed language interpreting expresses a value about the profession, the provided services and signed languages. Quality standards are essential for the interpreter's professional recognition, and benefit the users of the signed language interpreting services as well (Wit, 2020a). Standards define what the professional interpreter shall adhere to and inform the users of the service they may expect. Standards outline the requirements of the interpreter and the service provision (ISO, 2022, 2024). The users can request a certain level of service and, if the corresponding standards are not met, there are frameworks in place to challenge the service provider. Moreover, quality standards can assist the service user to locate the most suitable service provider.

However, practice shows that meeting professional standards can be a difficult balancing act for signed language interpreters as service providers (Wit, 2020a). The challenges appear to originate from the minority status of signed languages and deaf communities, in combination with their intrinsic solidarity and power relations with interpreters. Signed languages are, and always will be, minority languages (De Meulder et al., 2019). Minority languages, whether spoken or signed, typically have a lower status in society. Speakers or signers of those minority languages face daily societal barriers to access information and communication (Manning, Murray and Bloxs, 2022). Importantly, other than with speakers who can hear and speak, deaf signers have an added barrier as they themselves do not have an alternative to participate in spoken language communication.

The minority status of signed languages in combination with its societal barriers often places interpreters as service providers in a delicate situation. Signed language interpreters provide the needed access for deaf signers to a communicative event. How, when, and for whom interpreters provide their services gives interpreters a powerful position. Many event organisers are unaware of how to make an event accessible through signed language interpreting services and assume that having an interpreter in place is all that they need. Consequently, the interpreter as service provider, being the first point of contact for the event organiser, takes on the role to explain the actual requirements. This process can be substantial as clients

in general are very much unacquainted with the requirements.

Whenever this happens the interpreter can take on a role as ally to the deaf signers and negotiate with event organisers favourable conditions for participants. For example, ensuring an interpreting team is foreseen during breaks and not only during formal sessions. At the same time, the interpreter should ensure adequate working conditions for the interpreting team, such as the number of interpreters in the team, their placement in the room, and the possible audio-visual requirements (Wit and Sluis, 2016).

Ensuring that the needs of both the event organiser and deaf signers are met is part of the balancing act of the interpreter. Delivering interpreting services according to quality standards comes at a cost. Is the event organiser willing and able to assume that cost? Interpreters calculate their service costs based on their expertise and the type of communicative event they service. If these requirements and their costs are not accepted by the event organiser, the deaf person is consequently denied access to the event. Hence, the expense of the interpreting services provision becomes an access barrier.

As a result, interpreters can find themselves caught between maintaining quality standards and providing access. The interpreters could consider lowering their standards and the related costs for the sake of access, and, in doing so, deliver services that are of lower quality. In addition, setting their standards below those of spoken language interpreters would risk perpetuating the societal inequality between persons who are deaf and hearing. Moreover, as signed language interpreters are indirectly representing signing communities through their service provision, it may create the belief that signed languages are of lesser value than spoken languages.

Spoken language interpreters, specifically conference interpreters, established standards in the last century with the founding of the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC), training at university level, and agreements on working conditions with International Organisations (IOs) (Pöchhacker, 1999). Their need for establishing standards stemmed from their experiences working with international courts and the IOs following World War II (Baigorri-Jalón, 2014). Since then, society has generally accepted that conference spoken language interpreters work according to professional standards and receive adequate remuneration for their services.

In contrast, signed language interpreters originated from deaf communities, who encouraged those with the right skills to become an interpreter (Bontempo, 2015; Gile and Napier, 2020). The profession of signed language interpreters started in the community as dialogue interpreters, some of whom learned in practice to become conference signed language interpreters (Wit, Crasborn and Napier, 2024). The professionalisation of signed language interpreters has seen a rapid development with the establishment of training programmes and accreditation systems (Napier, 2009; Roy and Napier, 2015; Wit, 2020b). However, even though significant strides in standards and recognition have been made, signed language interpreters specialised in conference interpreting are still trailing behind their spoken language colleagues (Wit, Crasborn and Napier, 2023). The lack of societal and institutional recognition of conference spoken language interpreters is interlinked with the recognition of signers and their minority signed languages (Wit, 2024). Holding sign language interpreters to the same professional quality standards as spoken language interpreters will increase awareness and raise the acceptance of signed language interpreting services.

To do so, it is important that interpreter practitioners are informed of what interpreting quality is and what it means to different stakeholders. This article gives an insight into some of these perspectives, by

highlighting samples from different studies and a spontaneous collection of audience views from the efsli 2024 conference.

In the next section I will present the various perspectives on interpreting quality from deaf signers and interpreters. This is followed by an overview of training and continuing education options as part of quality assurance.

3.   Stakeholder Perspectives and Development

Deaf signers' perspectives on interpreting quality

In 2013, the Dutch Association of Sign Language Interpreters (NBTG) commissioned a study on the quality of sign language interpreters in the Netherlands. The initiative by the NBTG was the result of an ongoing discussion with the deaf representatives in the Netherlands about their discontent with the quality of sign language interpreters. There was a common experience that interpreters with a four–year bachelor's degree in Dutch Sign Language (NGT) interpreting did not meet the demands of the Dutch deaf community of signers. The study (Wit and Sluis, 2014) looked at what qualities deaf persons were looking for in an interpreter and which criteria deaf persons used to select an interpreter. The study was carried out among deaf persons via an online survey (N=190) and on–site at actual events (N=70). The results showed that what qualities deaf persons were looking for in an interpreter was very much dependent on the setting in which the interpreting service was provided. After proficiency in interpreting skills, trust was the highest criteria in medical settings; in work settings it was knowledge of jargon, and in educational settings the interpreter had to fit well into the classroom environment.

The main outcome of the study was that there was a mismatch between the expectations of the interpreters and the deaf persons. Deaf persons were unaware of what is needed to provide a quality service, and interpreters were unaware of what deaf clients expected of their interpreting services. Upon the public presentation of the findings, the NBTG organised several awareness raising workshops for both interpreters and deaf persons.

Interpreter perspectives (deaf and hearing) on interpreting quality

There is no common agreement among practitioners on how to define quality in interpreting services (Shlesinger, 1997; Kahane, 2000). This was also confirmed in a study carried out among International Sign (IS) interpreters in 2019 (Wit, Crasborn and Napier, 2023) and as well as a 2013 study (Wit and Sluis, 2014); there is no single definition of quality. Practitioners do agree, however, that quality interpreting services are situational: much depends on the setting as well as who is using the service and by whom it is provided.

The study among the conference IS interpreters was part of a larger PhD study (Wit, 2023) in which a total of 139 deaf and hearing signed language interpreters worldwide participated. The study revealed that practitioners agreed how quality among conference IS interpreters should be assured, namely through a robust (to be established) system, including training, assessment and structured rubrics. Also, an interpreter should pass a type of qualification, which would represent an established and agreed baseline.
Training interpreters

As was mentioned in the above study (Wit, 2023), practitioners agree that quality can be assured through training. The importance of training can also be seen in the longitudinal European study, where it showed that the availability, duration and the level of signed language interpreter training programmes in Europe has increased (Wit, 2020b). This study, carried out every four years across forty-five European countries and regions, shows that in 2020 there were over seventy sign language interpreting programmes, ranging from vocational to master degree programmes (Wit, 2020b). Some countries have more than one educational programme; others have none. The next study in this series will be in 2025, five instead of four years after the last study, as it will be carried out in collaboration with the 40-year anniversary of the European Union of the Deaf (EUD).

A few trends with regard to training and quality assurance have become visible over the past twenty years (2000 – 2020). An increasing number of programmes have added entry requirements for students to enter the training programme, such as a certain level of signed language fluency. In addition, in several countries a degree in interpreting has been made a governmental prerequisite to be able to work as an interpreter. For a detailed overview of the training of sign language interpreters in Europe see de Wit (2020).

A less positive trend is the barrier deaf persons face to attend an interpreter training programme. There are few opportunities for deaf persons to be admitted to the existing training programmes for signed language interpreters. These programmes were originally predominantly designed to educate interpreters to interpret between the national spoken and signed language. Some of these national programmes have in the meantime made the necessary adaptions to allow deaf and hearing students to be trained together as signed language interpreters (Urdal, Skaten and Tiselius, 2024). Other countries resorted to temporary solutions by setting up short-term programmes specifically for deaf interpreters only (Gebruers et al., 2024). This, however, results in a lower educational degree for deaf interpreters. Crucially, when deaf and hearing interpreters are not being jointly trained they lack the knowledge and experience to effectively collaborate in mixed deaf and hearing teams.

Continuing professional development for interpreters

An educational degree in interpreting is one of the components for quality assurance. In many service professions, practitioners are required to update their skills through continuous education. Some countries have similar requirements for signed language interpreters (Wit, 2020b). Other possibilities, however few, are to specialise in a certain area such as legal interpreting. Most often interpreters must pursue or organise their own specialisation as there is not a broad range offered. Unlike spoken language interpreters, signed language interpreters typically do not add new working languages, such as another signed language or English. Even though English is ubiquitous in the daily work of interpreters, there is no established solution for signed language interpreters to add English as a working language (de Wit, forthcoming).

Mentoring and supervision programmes for practitioners, for example peer mentoring, are available in some countries. Participation in these mentoring programmes is mainly voluntary; however, some practitioners view them as essential to continue to offer a high quality service (Winston and Lee, 2013; Wit, Schaumberger and Salami, 2013; European Commission Dep. for Interpretation, 2021). Mentoring is also offered as part of interpreter training programmes, specifically for students or trainee interpreters, to gain the needed practical experience.

To encourage practitioners to continue their learning for the benefit of quality assurance it needs to be evident what motivates practitioners to further their education and skills. For example, do practitioners have the self-motivation, or do they need specific incentives? In general, professionals who have higher skills levels, specialisations and qualifications also receive higher remunerations. For signed language interpreters this is true in some countries, but the additional pay is often not substantial.

Quality control mechanisms

A few countries have regulated the signed language interpreter profession or have some kind of quality monitoring system. An interpreting degree is the most common form; however, there are few mechanisms in place to monitor the interpreting quality after graduation. Some countries have an accreditation or registration body where interpreters are officially registered and must adhere to specific requirements, such as participating in continuous professional development. This accreditation body is sometimes independent or is part of another organisation. An interpreter can become accredited by this body, for example, through accreditation tests, proof of interpreter qualification and experience, or a combination thereof. Notably, accreditation of interpreters and their recruitment as an accredited interpreter is not always mandatory at national level.

The only exception are interpreters recruited to work in criminal proceedings in a member state of the European Union (EU). According to article 5.2 of the Directive 2010/64/EU[1] the EU member states must establish a public register with qualified interpreters to ensure that suspected or accused persons understand the language of the criminal proceedings.

Perspectives on interpreting quality

As is apparent from the literature, the perspectives on how practitioners define interpreting quality in general is diverse. To illustrate these different perspectives on interpreting quality, I conducted a live interactive poll at the efsli 2024 conference in Torino, Italy. During my presentation on interpreting quality, I asked the participants with the use of an online platform[2] several questions (Annex 1).

First, the attendees were asked what their main profession is, to which most indicated that they were a signed language interpreter (69%), followed by educators (5%), researchers and translators (4%) and others (12%).

This was followed by a multiple-choice question that was first posted to interpreters only: What is the one most important quality criteria for users of interpreting services? And the same question was then asked separately to deaf and hearing users of interpreting services but adapted to address the deaf or hearing person directly: What is the most important quality criterion *you* are looking for in an interpreter?

The answers of 169 interpreters and 29 deaf users of interpreting services are combined in Table 1.3 An

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1   https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dir/2010/64/oj/eng (last accessed 28 July 2025)

2   https://www.slido.com/ (last accessed 27 July 2025)

3   The answers from the hearing users of interpreting services are not incorporated as they were slightly skewed because one of the ten answers in the multiple-choice was not visible.

interpreter qualification is ranked highest among interpreters; this ranked third with deaf respondents. The deaf respondents state that a fluent and clear signing style is the most important quality criteria for them, which interpreters rank third. Overall, the top four criteria are the same for interpreters and deaf persons, although these ranked differently in order of importance.

Perspective of interpreters (n=169)		Perspective of deaf persons (n = 29)	
Interpreter qualification	26%	Fluent & clear signing style	34%
Professional attitude	22%	Highly experienced	21%
Fluent & clear signing style	19%	Interpreter qualification	17%
Highly experienced	9%	Professional attitude	10%
Flexibility	7%	Member of a deaf/signing community	7%
Confidentiality	6%	Confidentiality	3%
Member of a deaf/signing community	6%	Fluency interpreting into a spoken language	3%
University degree	2%	None of the above	3%
Fluency interpreting into a spoken language	2%	Flexibility	0%
None of the above	1%	University degree	0%

Table 1: Perspectives on the most important interpreting quality criterion for deaf users of interpreting services

The interpreters were also asked to indicate their highest educational degree in interpreting, which is presented in Figure 1.
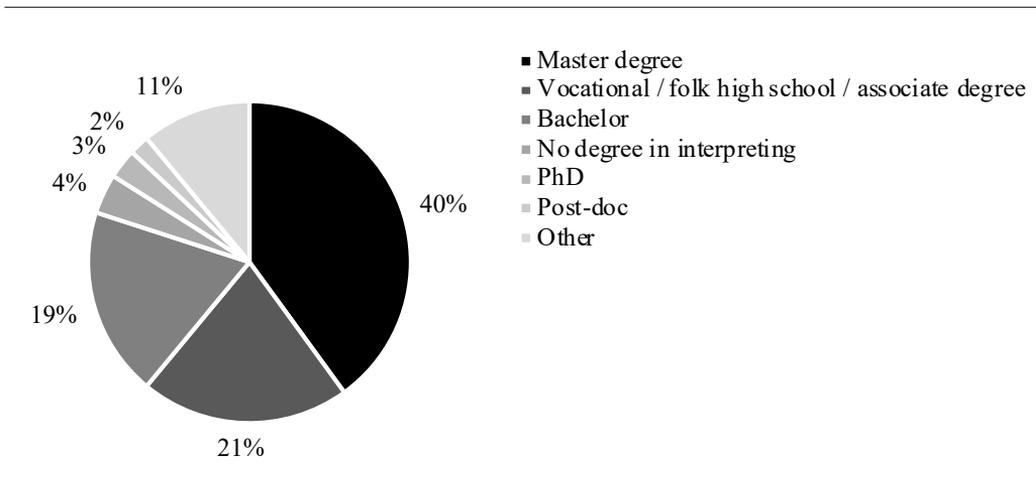

Figure 1: Highest educational degree in interpreting

Next, the participants were asked how an interpreter should maintain their interpreter qualification. They were given 7 predefined options and were asked to rank these in order of importance. A total of 144 participants answered this question (Figure 2).
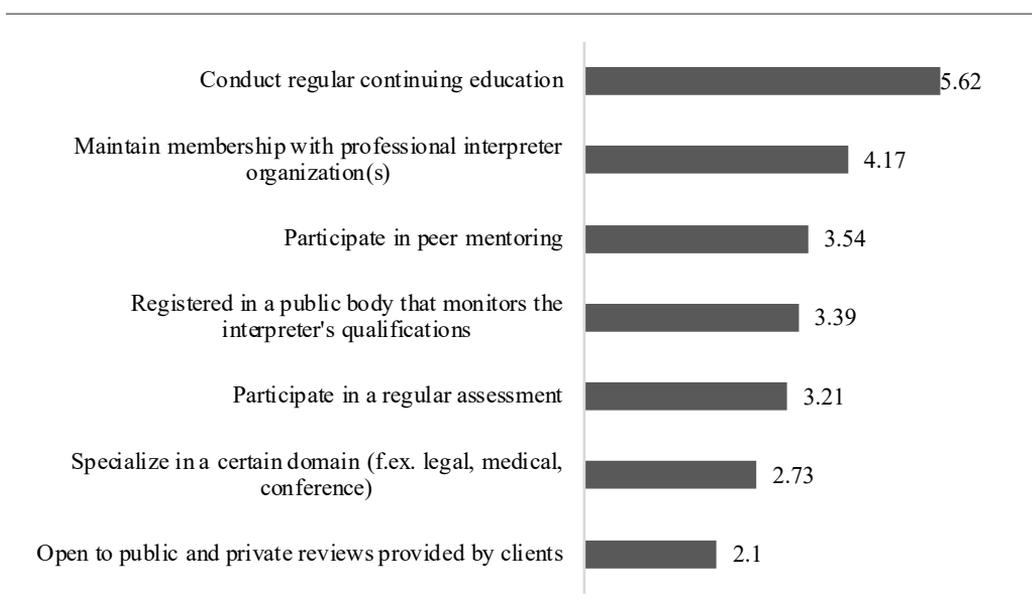
Figure 2: Perspectives on how signed language interpreters should maintain their qualification: ranked by order of importance (n=144)

In summary, the participants at the annual European conference for signed language interpreters (efsli 2024) were mostly interpreters (69%). For purpose of reflection and illustration, the audience members were asked to share their perspectives on interpreting quality. The top answers regarding interpreting quality all pertained to training. The audience's number one criterion is an interpreter qualification and maintaining that by attending regular continuous education. The view of the audience members on the importance of an interpreting degree is also evident by their own highest degree in interpreting, a master's degree.

4.   Discussion and Conclusion

During the last 20 years the profession of signed language interpreting in Europe has undergone rapid developments (Wit, 2020b). These developments are different from spoken language interpreting, which has a longer history of institutionalisation and societal acceptance (Gile and Napier, 2020; Wit, 2023). Signed language minorities are continuously fighting for their recognition as well as societal access. Signed language interpreters are witness to these daily battles and as service providers carry a responsibility of representation and alliance. Included in that responsibility is the act of providing a consumer–driven quality service (Dean and Pollard Jr., 2005).

How an interpreter can provide the best quality interpreting service for all stakeholders in a communicative event is an ongoing discussion. In this article I presented the perspectives of different stakeholders, illustrated with individual international perspectives of participants at the efsli 2024 conference. These perspectives agree that next to training and professional development, interpreters must continuously engage in professional reflection. Such reflection goes hand in hand with raising awareness among

consumers, deaf and hearing, about the professional standards that need to be in place for the interpreter to carry out the best possible service. Awareness raising could also be done in collaboration with deaf signers, provided that the deaf signers are not overburdened as this is already a regular part of their lives.

Most importantly, lobbying for quality standards requires that interpreters do not accept quality differences between interpreting services in spoken or signed languages. If signed language interpreters lower their standards, it devalues signed languages and signed language interpreting services. If interpreters make exceptions in their quality standards because they are working with a signed language, the societal inequality between deaf and hearing persons will not cease to exist.

This is also true for the training of interpreters. Signed language interpreters should be able to be educated at the same educational level as spoken language interpreters. Signed language interpreters should aim for the best possible education for deaf and hearing interpreters alike. Specifically, the barriers deaf persons face in accessing interpreter training is not solved by establishing ad hoc training programmes for deaf interpreters. A separate programme perpetuates the systematic inequality and division between deaf and hearing interpreters. As a result, deaf interpreters are less educated, have a lower educational degree, lower remuneration, fewer opportunities and working conditions, and do not have a shared foundational practice with hearing interpreters. It is unjust that in most countries persons who are deaf still cannot be trained as a signed language interpreter on an equal level as hearing signed language interpreters. It is also unjust that a hearing person without any signed language fluency can enter an interpreting programme and obtain a higher degree in interpreting than the native deaf signers of that language. Ultimately, a quality interpreting service starts with educated and skilled interpreters. Therefore, a joint academic training in interpreting is a requirement, whether the person is deaf or hearing, whether in spoken or in signed languages. As with any other (spoken language) interpreter training, language fluency should be a prerequisite to enter the interpreter training programme.

In summary, it is essential that interpreters, spoken and signed, deaf persons and representative organisations collectively lobby for quality standards in signed language interpreting. These standards should be monitored by an interpreting quality assurance mechanism at a national level. With a robust monitoring mechanism in place, deaf persons will have a greater chance of a quality interpreting service and an overall societal recognition and acceptance of signed language interpreting service provisions.

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Supporting the sustainability of the profession through online, post–registration specialist training at master's level

Rachel Mapson and Yvonne Waddell

Abstract

This presentation describes the MSc in Advancing Practice for Signed/Spoken language interpreters provided by Queen Margaret University in Scotland. Established in 2017 by practicing interpreters, this qualification is unique in Europe. The programme is designed to provide credit–bearing CPD and offers flexible study either towards an MSc or single 20–credit modules at ECQF Level 7, with many modules designed around specialist domains of work.

The programme is delivered fully online but comprises both asynchronous and regular synchronous activity, with students studying part–time alongside their professional practice. Since students are already trained and working as professional interpreters, the focus of this course is on self–development, and all modules focus on reflective practice within the specialist domains in which students work. Formative assessments based on case studies are followed by summative work that relates theoretical constructs to students' own professional practice.

Established initially for UK interpreters, the course has been extended and is now available to interpreters worldwide who work between a spoken language and a signed language. The language of the programme is English, but students' professional practice will be in their own national sign language and the majority spoken language of their country. The increasingly international student cohorts encourage diversity of perspectives and understanding of the issues impacting the profession and expand stud–ents' professional networks.

The programme aims to provide continued professional development that cultivates highly reflective practitioners, who can develop specialist skills and knowledge in different domains, promoting self–care and sustainability in the profession.

Keywords

Continuous Professional Development, online, master's degree, reflective practice, specialist domains

1.   Introduction

The Master of Science (MSc) in Advancing Practice for Signed/Spoken language interpreters provided

by Queen Margaret University was established in 2017 and originally aimed at experienced British Sign Language (BSL) interpreters as continuous professional development (CPD). In 2021 the programme was made available to international students and offers a unique opportunity for interpreters to develop their reflective practice in a variety of specialist domains of work. The programme was designed by practicing interpreters for interpreters working between a signed and a spoken language; this qualification is unique in Europe as it provides credit–bearing CPD while offering flexible online study that can be accessed worldwide and studied alongside interpreters' ongoing professional practice.

The programme was designed in response to interpreters who expressed a desire for CPD that had a focus on specialist domains of work but had greater substance than many of the one–day training provision and webinars that are more frequently available. The MSc programme is therefore designed for existing practitioners rather than as a training route to become an interpreter. Students are required to have at least three years of professional interpreting experience and to be registered as an interpreter (if working in a country where registration is available).

By providing credit–bearing modules at Master's level, our provision may also contribute to an emerging career structure for interpreters. For interpreters registered in the UK, each 20–credit module fulfills the annual requirement for CPD points from the registration bodies (NRCPD and SRLPDC). Interpreters registered in other countries are also able to use their module completion as evidence for CPD purposes. Routes to becoming an interpreter are vary widely, with some interpreters having undertaken university training and others involved in a more vocational approach. So, although MSc programmes typically require students to have achieved a degree, all applications for this programme are reviewed on an individual basis, without the need for a previous formal academic qualification. However, the programme is taught online with programme material in English, so there is a need for students to have sufficient English competence to be able to study at this level.

The focus of the MSc is to develop interpreters' reflective practice. Each module allows students to focus on their own work as a practice professional, analysing their ethical decision–making and exploring specialist domains of work in depth. Studying at a university provides students with access to a wide range of research studies and academic material to extend their understanding and support their reflections. Interpreters who participated in the market research undertaken before the MSc programme was established reported that they rarely had access to this type of material but felt that engaging with the newest research was important to them. The MSc has the further benefit of allowing students to conduct their own research.

2. Programme structure and delivery

All students initially have access to a bespoke induction module to enable familiarisation with the online learning platform, other technology and expectations of academic study. For students on the MSc programme, this is then followed by the two core Theory and Practice of Interpreting modules which are designed to bring experienced interpreters up to date with the latest interpreting research and approaches and to re/introduce students to academic study. Those joining for a single module may opt to study a core module or one of the elective modules, all designed around specialist domains of work. Students studying for an academic award will move from the core modules to select from a range of elective modules, with those opting for the MSc going on to study the Research Methods and Dissertation

modules. The latter involves students undertaking their own research project. The overall structure and range of modules available is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Programme structure and module options

The Interpreting in Healthcare Settings module is the most popular elective, with most students engaging in healthcare work. Other modules focus on working in Mental Healthcare, Legal Settings, Education, Employment and Arts and Culture. All modules take a broad perspective of these domains. For example, the legal module explores civil, health and employment–related legal matters in addition to police and court work. Similarly, the Interpreting in Arts and Culture Settings module concerns dance, poetry, literature, museums, and media work as well as theatre interpreting. An additional elective focuses on Supportive Practice. This module is designed for interpreters who want to explore taking on a more supportive role, which includes coaching, mentoring and supervision.

The interpreting and the Research Methods modules are accredited as 20–credits at ECQF Level 7, while the Dissertation module is accredited as 60 credits. Although students can join to study on a single module, those wishing to study for an academic award can select from three different pathways; the decision about which pathway to take can be made at any point during the programme. Achieving 60 credits (from three modules) permits students to graduate with a Postgraduate Certificate, while those taking six modules (120 credits) can graduate with a Postgraduate Diploma or continue with the Dissertation to achieve the MSc. The academic award options and components are summarised in Figure 2.
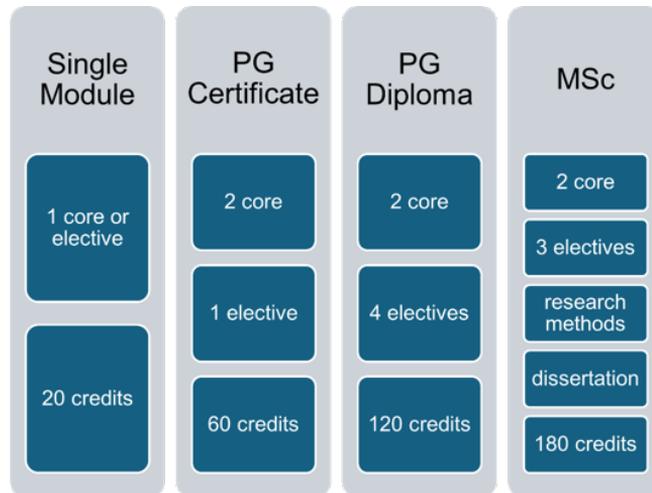
Figure 2: Academic award options and components

3.　The student experience

All modules allow ample opportunity for students to develop their reflective practice. Learning is supported through structured module material, peer group discussions, and tutorials with the programme team. Reading material includes literature relating to interpreting and translation studies as well as domain–specific texts and guidance. In healthcare, for example, students can access the same material that is used for healthcare programmes, to better understand the perspectives of the clinicians they work with. However, not all the reading material is academic in nature, and all modules include a variety of texts, from blog posts and podcasts to videos.

A key component of the programme is the weekly synchronous activity that takes place online, either in the form of a tutorial led by the programme team, or a structured peer group discussion. These are opportunities for sharing experiences and learning from each other and are much valued by the students, many of whom predominantly work alone.

A formative assessment part way through each module provides students with the opportunity to try out their reflective writing skills by exploring a video case study provided by the team. This provides an opportunity for students to receive feedback on their writing and guidance towards their summative assessment at the end of the module. This is particularly valuable to students who are new to Higher Education or those who have had a long break from studying. Each module then culminates in the production of an electronic portfolio in which students reflect in depth on a relevant aspect of their own professional practice. This submission is graded for the module credits and is also a further opportunity to receive feedback and feedforward to further development.

Throughout the programme we encourage use of Demand Control Schema (Dean and Pollard, 2013) as

a framework for reflective practice, with the programme containing bespoke material created for us by Dr. Robyn Dean. The programme team are practising interpreters, and the focus is on practical aspects of our work, particularly the interpersonal dynamics that interpreters navigate in liaison situations. We appreciate that the demands of the job don't arise one at a time, because the situations we work in are frequently complex. Therefore, being able to analyse in detail the different demands we experience and why our control decisions (Dean and Pollard, 2013) vary in different situations is a crucial element of reflective practice. The focus is on a more nuanced understanding of the goals of the environment and the thought worlds of the other professionals we work alongside. This results in transformative learning that makes a genuine difference to students' professional practice.

The benefits of reflective practice

The reflective practice developed on the programme provides direct benefits to interpreters by directly addressing the challenges interpreters experience.

Burnout through over-work (Maslach, 1982) can result in a change in behaviour and way of working. This can present as emotional and/or physical exhaustion, a lack of concern for others and diminished trust. The self-deprecation, low morale and sense of failure this results in are characteristic of burnout (Maslach, 1982). Hawkins (2012) identified the risk of this for those working in the helping professions who reach mid-career and fail to continue to learn and develop, relying instead on a formulaic approach based on experiences with previous clients. Hawkins and Shohet (2012) therefore recommend a preventative approach to burnout that involves reflective practice and a healthy work/life balance.

With a specific focus on sign language interpreters, Pollard et al. (2021) examine the sources of stress and discuss how reflective practice can lessen burnout. It reduces stress by providing effective responses to the many demands of the job and can have restorative effects. Engaging in reflective practice can therefore promote longevity within the profession and is a mode of practice evident within many of the professions that interpreters work alongside.

Fostering a supportive profession

The horizontal violence that has been identified as an issue within the interpreting profession (Ott, 2012; Hill, 2018; Best and Wilkins, 2021) is also addressed within the programme, particularly within the Supportive Practice module. Developing more supportive practitioners and nurturing their mentoring skills will help retain professionals in the field while also providing the support and encouragement that novice interpreters require. Many of the students who have studied this module have gone on to deliver training and continue to support new interpreters.

Several students are also promoting a supportive profession via sharing their dissertation research findings, with several presenting at conferences during 2024. Research topics are varied, and range from interpreters' experience of the menopause, interpreting for deaf children in healthcare appointments, working with language deprived clients, interpreter clinician rapport and interpreting the sharing of bad news. A recent MSc completion explored the social support experienced by interpreters working in online on-demand services, a topic that directly addresses the support experienced, and valued, by interpreters.

The student perspective

The programme is revalidated every five years, as is standard practice for all degree programmes at Queen Margaret University. The anonymous student feedback generated as part of this process evidences students' positive experience of the programme and the suitability of the prorgramme design. The first quote here reflects the flexibility of the programme to accommodate students who experience life events and work pressures that might impact on their studies:

> *The course design is excellent in anticipating fluctuating demands on time and life and fitting around that, and this has been borne out for me this time round. Regardless, the coursework load was manageable, if prudent on what to read and focus on. The materials and reading were excellent and relevant and exciting to engage with.*

Students also commented on how the module content is comprehensive but not too restrictive, permitting them to explore their own issues of interest.

> *The content of modules is carefully curated to give students access to a wide range of resources, while leaving plenty of room for us to further investigate our own particular areas of interest. The content is regularly updated with hot off the press papers.*

Students commented on the very real and immediate benefit of their studies:

It really helps with everyday interpreting work. I now go to assignments equipped with relevant vocabulary and theoretical knowledge to frame my practice, which I did not have before I started this course. However, the benefits extended beyond students' everyday professional practice, and despite the online programme delivery a sense of community is evident within the student population:

> *It provides a great opportunity to get to know colleagues outside of your own community/region which really enriches the experience.*

The student experience is further enriched now we have a mix of international students on the programme, all contributing different perspectives and experiences.

4.   Conclusions

The programme is designed to ensure the sustainability of the sign language interpreting profession, through keeping interpreters engaged and involved in the profession for longer, and by equipping those interpreters in tools that promote self-care as well as developing skills to support those newer to the profession. Our experience to date evidences that the programme is achieving more than this through developing future leaders within the profession, as MSc graduates start to share their research and engage in delivering training of their own. The programme also serves as a route to further study, with one graduate returning to study for a PhD.

Interpreters with at least three years' experience who are interested in applying to study, for a single module or the MSc programme, should contact interpreting@qmu.ac.uk for further information.

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Polish SLTI profession and the concept of continuing pro-fessional development: Key findings of a nationwide census

Aleksandra Kalata–Zawłocka and Kamila Skalska

Abstract

This paper discusses the findings of the first nationwide census of Polish Sign Language interpreters and translators (SLTI), conducted by the Association of Polish Sign Language Interpreters (STPJM) in collaboration with the Institute of Applied Linguistics, University of Warsaw. The census aimed at mapping the SLTI profession in Poland, including demographic profiles, educational backgrounds, and approaches to continuous professional development (CPD). Drawing on 236 responses collected via an online survey, this study provides insights into the professional trajectories of Polish SLTIs, emphasising challenges and opportunities in their professional development. The discussion contextualises findings within the broader European landscape of interpreter education and CPD frameworks, with references to the British experience, recent Polish studies, and an analysis of CPD activities undertaken by STPJM members and candidates in 2023. Key conclusions underline the need for structured CPD programmes and institutional support to address the evolving demands of the SLTI profession in Poland.

Keywords

Signed language interpreting, continuing professional education, CPD

1. Introduction

The field of signed language interpreting in Poland has grown significantly in recent decades. However, despite its increasing visibility, it remains an unregulated profession, lacking a standardised certification process or a comprehensive training framework. Inspired by the UK's 2021 SLTI census (Napier *et al.*, 2022), the Polish census aimed to gather accurate data on the demographic, educational, and professional characteristics of SLTIs. This paper focuses on the concept of CPD as a critical pathway for improving the skills and competencies of Polish interpreters.

2. Methodology

The census took the form of an online survey distributed from August to September 2023. Before its launch, the survey underwent a consultation and piloting process to ensure its relevance and usability.

Consultations involved an IT specialist, a spoken and signed language interpreters, and a signed language researcher, who provided input on the technical and content-related aspects of the questionnaire. The survey was also piloted by three signed language interpreters, whose feedback led to refinements in question clarity and structure. The final questionnaire included 87 questions across six thematic sections, covering demographics, cultural-linguistic background, education, professional status, working methods, and income. The questions were primarily multiple-choice, with a few open-ended items and detailed follow-ups based on respondents' initial answers. A total of 242 responses were collected, with 236 valid for analysis.

3.   Findings

Response distribution

The highest number of responses (n=91, 38,4% of all the surveys) came from the Mazovian voivodeship surrounding Warsaw, the capital city of Poland. This reflects the concentration of interpreters in the region, likely due to its urban nature and proximity to key institutions and organisations supporting the SLTI profession.
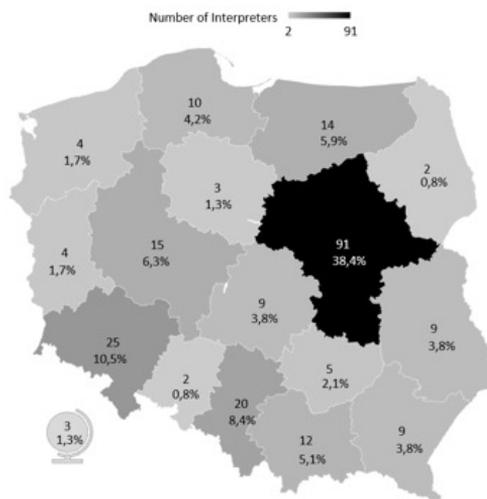

Figure 1. Geographical distribution of respondents by voivodeship (n=236)[1]

The map illustrating the geographical distribution of responses draws attention to significant variations in interpreter presence across other regions, with noticeably fewer responses from rural and less populated areas. This distribution underscores the potential challenges in accessing interpreter services and professional networks outside major urban centres.

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1   The globe icon on the map indicates individuals residing abroad.

Demographic and professional profiles: a comparison of data from Po–land and the UK

The average age of the respondents was 38 years, with 78% identifying as female. A majority (62%) were hearing, while 15% were deaf and 20% hard of hearing. Most interpreters worked part–time, with only 28% identifying in–terpreting as their primary occupation, while the largest group (43%) consisted of interpreters who had another main job and engaged in interpreting as an additional activity.

Comparing the audiological status of interpreters in Poland and the UK reveals interesting differences. In the UK's 2021 SLTI census (Napier et al., 2022), deaf/hard of hearing interpreters constituted 3,9% of respondents, a significantly smaller proportion compared to the 15% (deaf) and 20% (HoH) observed in Poland. Hearing interpreters dominate in both countries, yet in the Polish census, their representation (62%) appears lower relative to their overall numbers in the profession.

One possible explanation for this disparity is the greater engagement of deaf and hard-of-hearing interpreters in the first Polish census. For these groups, the census might have seemed particularly relevant as a platform to voice their unique perspectives and challenges within the profession. In contrast, hearing interpreters, who often have more stable access to professional networks and opportunities, might have been underrepresented in the Polish survey. This, however, remains a hypothesis to be confirmed by future edi–tions of the census or other projects.

Both the Polish and UK SLTI censuses reveal a higher proportion of LGBTQIA+ individuals compared to the general populations of their respective countries. In the UK, 14.5% of respondents identified as LGBTQIA+, significantly higher than the national average of 2.2% (ONS, 2011). Similarly, in Poland, a considerable number of respondents identified as LGBTQIA+, though precise comparative figures are unavailable due to nondisclosure rate amounting to 20%.[2]

Signed language interpreter education in Poland: background

While comparisons between the Polish and UK SLTI professions reveal in–teresting parallels and contrasts, the following section focuses exclusively on insights drawn from the Polish census. The data highlighted significant gaps in formal interpreter training. Polish SLTI education is fragmented, with no unified certification system or university programme providing sufficient preparation and enabling a good start into the profession. (Kalata–Zawłocka and Koziol, 2024, in print). Consequently, practitioners rely heavily on ad hoc CPD opportunities offered by professional associations and NGOs.

Figures 2 and 3 illustrate the education levels of respondents in the Polish SLTI community, comparing data from 2017 and 2023. The 2017 data (Figure 2), based on research by Kalata–Zawłocka (2017), show that 55% of respond–ents held Master's degrees, 5% had Bachelor's degrees, and 39% reported secondary education. By 2023 (Figure 3), the percentage of respondents with Master's degrees remained relatively stable at 56.8%. However, a shift occurred in other educational categories: the proportion of respondents with Bachelor's degrees increased to 14.4%, while those with secondary education decreased to 22.5%. These changes indicate a gradual shift toward higher levels of academic quali–fications within the community. Despite this progress, both datasets underscore the ongoing lack of interpreting–specific education programmes.

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2   This difference in disclosure rates illustrates a cultural contrast: while UK interpreters might feel more comfortable openly identifying their sexual orientation, the Polish data suggests that sexual orientation remains a more sensitive topic for many respondents. This may reflect broader societal attitudes and the challenges faced by LGBTQIA+ individuals in Poland.
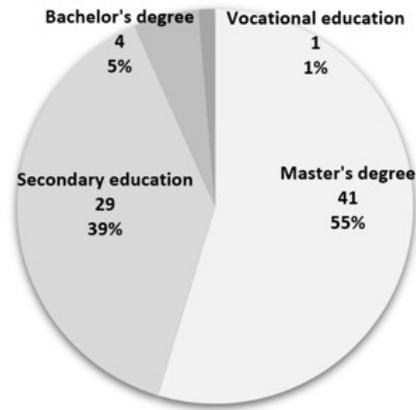
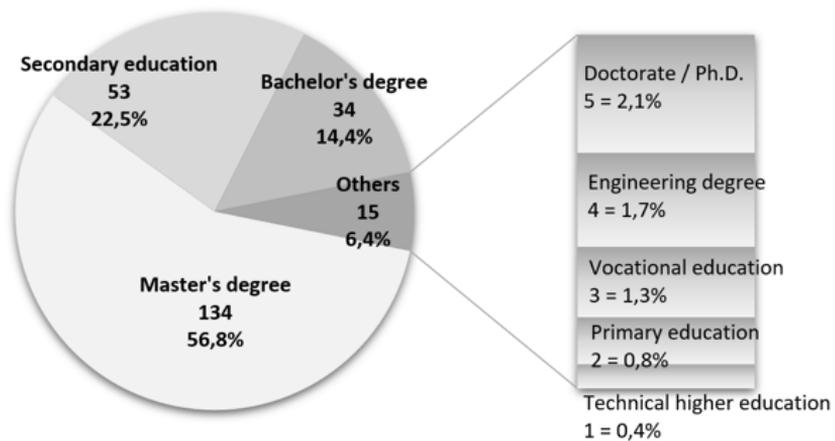*Figure 2. Educational levels of respondents in 2017(n=75)*

Figure 3. Educational levels of respondents in 2023 (n=236)

Signed language interpreter education in Poland: formal professional preparation

The Polish SLTI census provided detailed insights into the professional preparation of interpreters, with special attention to their credentials, including certification and formal training hours.

One of the areas examined was the possession of certificates or diplomas demonstrating acquired interpreting skills. The data revealed that 67.5% of the respondents held documents related to their interpreting or translation training. However, 28.5% of the possessed certificates related specifically to language training. A small proportion (3.9%) of the respondents reported having other types of documents.
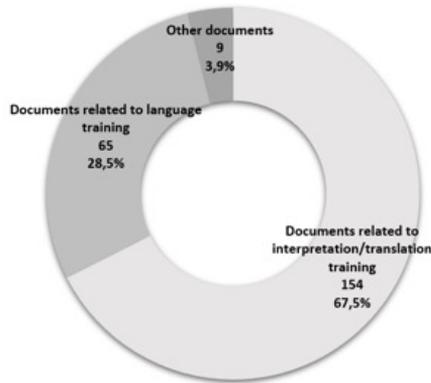
Figure 4. Certificates and diplomas confirming the skills of the respondents

The census also explored the number of hours respondents had dedicated to formal interpreter training. Among the respondents, 22.5% reported having no formal training, while 20.3% reported completing fewer than 200 hours of formal training. Only 18.2% reported 200–500 hours of structured course-work. This limited exposure to formal education contrasts with international standards, such as in the USA, where certification by the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) typically requires a Bachelor's degree, equating to approximately 1,800 hours of training.
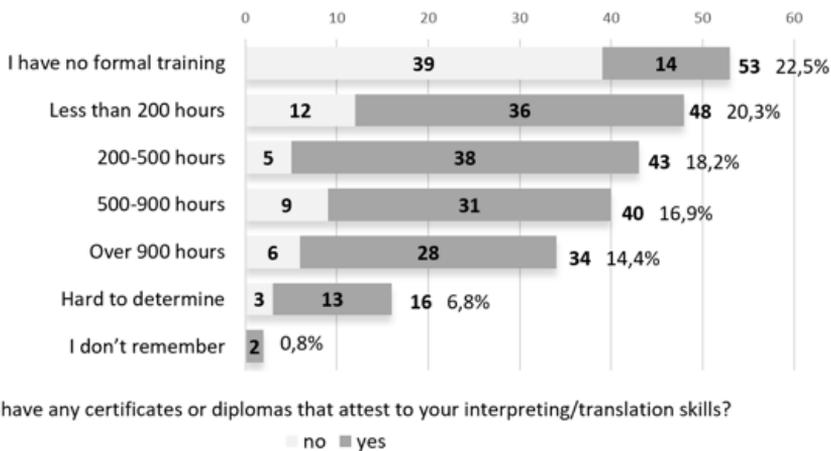

Figure 5. Hours of formal training completed by respondents

While some individuals report no formal preparation yet possess diplomas, others complete language-oriented courses that do not directly equip them with interpreting skills. It seems that some respondents themselves were unclear about whether certain diplomas or certificates should be categorised as

formal preparation for the interpreting profession. The inconsistency in the time respondents devote to professional preparation yet again points to the lack of formal education and the fact that they are left to their own devices as to how to deal with this situation.

4. Continuing Professional Development (CPD) in STPJM

Now that we have established the baseline for the professional preparation of signed language interpreters and translators in Poland, we turn our attention to CPD initiatives, with a particular focus on the programme introduced by the Association of Polish Sign Language Interpreters (STPJM). We will explore its structure, reception, and impact on the interpreting community, keeping in mind Lee *et al.*'s (2018) definition of CPD as a broad term encompassing ongoing knowledge and skill development undertaken by professionals after their initial qualification.

Approximately six years ago, STPJM introduced its own CPD programme, designed specifically for its full and candidate members alike. However, the introduction of the programme did not come without challenges. Initially, it faced resistance from interpreters, some of whom viewed it as an imposition or a condition tied to their membership status. Concerns were raised about being "forced" to engage in CPD activities to maintain membership, reflecting a tension between the perceived value of CPD and the obligations it introduced. Over time, however, the programme has become a key part of professional development within the association, fostering a culture of lifelong learning and collaboration among its members.

The CPD programme implemented by STPJM is built around three main pil-lars:

1.   Proactive professional development: activities focused on enhancing professional skills and knowledge, such as attending workshops, conferences, and training sessions.
2.   Active involvement in the Deaf community: engagement in activi-ties that strengthen ties with the Deaf community, including cultural events, advocacy efforts, and collaboration in deaf-led initiatives.
3.   Supporting the professional organisation: voluntary contributions to the growth and sustainability of STPJM through organisational and administrative support, such as serving on committees, in working groups, or assisting with events.

These three pillars aim to balance individual skill enhancement with community engagement and organisational development, reflecting a holistic approach to CPD.

The programme operates on a point-based system whereby members earn points for their participation in various CPD activities. Full members are expected to collect 10 points annually to maintain their active membership status (one point is equivalent to an 8-hour training day.) Candidate members, undergoing a two-year preparatory period, are required to collect 20 points during their candidacy. Points are assigned to activities based on their relevance and intensity, ensuring that members engage meaningfully with the programme's objectives. To track progress, members report their activities in a standardised spreadsheet, which is reviewed by the STPJM board. If the required number of points is accumulated, the member retains their "active" status. If not, their status changes to "passive", allowing for a three-year grace period to regain active status. After this period, membership is terminated. The inclusion

of activities across the three pillars ensures that the programme goes beyond traditional CPD. While proactive professional development remains a key focus, the emphasis on community involvement and organisational support encourages interpreters to contribute to the profession in diverse ways, while also providing members with opportunities for "life breaks" when needed, ensuring the programme is both supportive and sustainable.

To illustrate how participation in CPD manifests within the STPJM membership, we reviewed the activities of our members and candidates in 2023. The chart below provides a breakdown of the points collected by each group across various CPD activities.
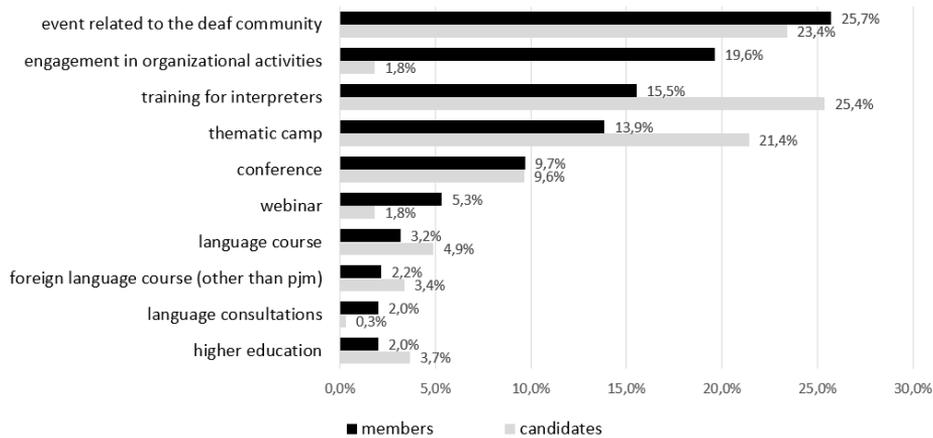

Figure 6. CPD activities among STPJM members and candidates in 2023

The data points to interesting trends in activity preferences. For full members, the most frequently chosen activities are those related to engagement within the Deaf community (25.7%). Meanwhile, candidates show a distinct preference for participating in interpreter training (25.4%), which is expected given their preparatory phase of professional development. Notably, absent from the chart are activities such as mentoring and supervision. Less than 1% of members engage in such activities, which is understandable given that these opportunities are not yet widely available in Poland.

It is important to note that the members engaging in CPD activities constitute only 25% of the general population of interpreters and translators who partic–ipated in the census. This entails a serious challenge: while STPJM has established a structured framework for CPD, a large part of the interpreter community in Poland remains outside its direct influence. This demonstrates a pressing need for outreach and inclusive strategies to extend CPD opportunities to a wider audience.

5. CPD in a broader interpreter population

But what about the broader interpreter community? How do interpreters out–side STPJM engage in

professional development, and what challenges do they face? The census provides valuable insights into these questions, shedding light on the state of CPD across the entire SLTI profession in Poland. The majority of respondents (57,2%) spend their time learning Polish Sign Lan-guage, as shown in the chart below. What follows is development of skills related to interpreting and translation (37,7%). However, nearly 40% of re-spondents reported not participating in any form of CPD activity, raising concerns about the accessibility and perceived value of professional devel-opment.
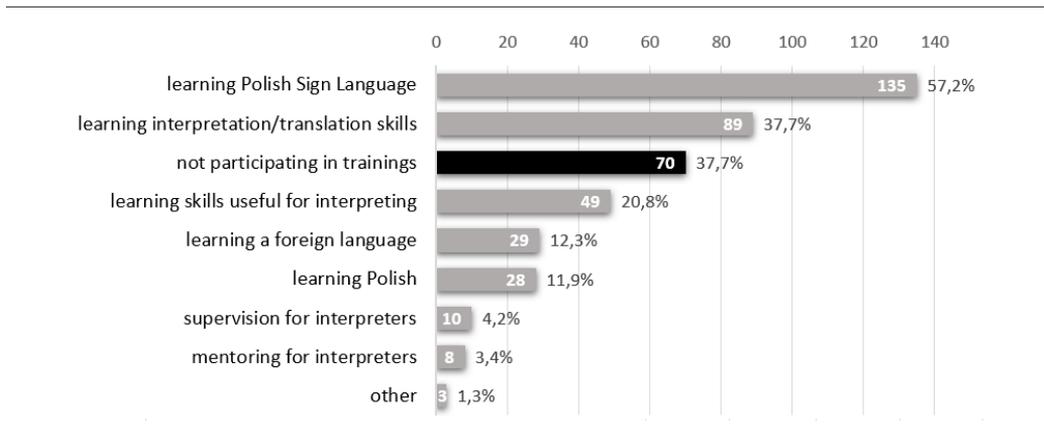
Figure 7. Most common forms of professional development among respondents (n=236)

The disparity between interpreters whose primary job is interpreting and those for whom it is an additional occupation is also evident in their engagement with CPD. Respondents who work interpreting full-time dedicate significantly more time to professional development compared to their counterparts for whom interpreting is not the main source of income. As shown in the chart below, 27.3% of full-time interpreters reported dedicating over 100 hours annually to CPD, compared to 23.5% of part-time interpreters.

Figure 8. Average time spent annually on improving professional skills (n=236)

Looking specifically at 2023, the data shows that in this particular year 41.9% of respondents engaged in professional development activities, while 28.4% did not.

Yes	I have not at all	This year? No
99 41,9%	70 29,7%	67 28,4%

0%   10%   20%   30%   40%   50%   60%   70%   80%   90%   100%
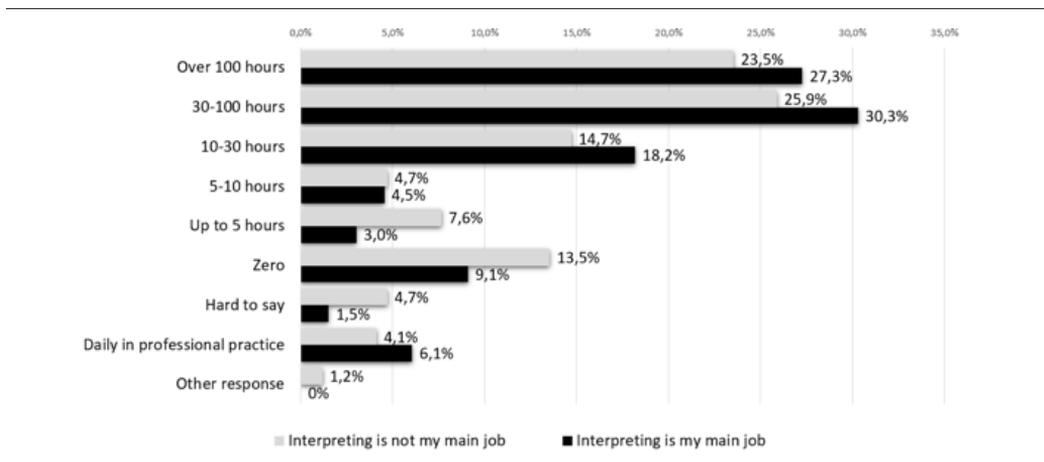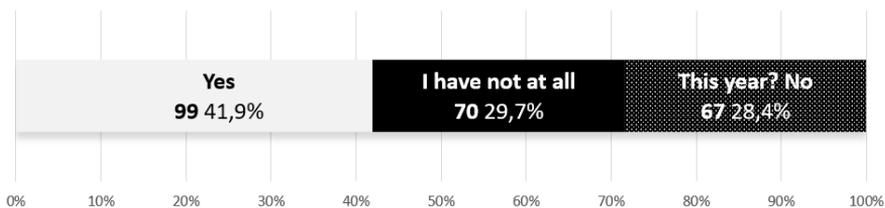
Figure 9. Respondents' involvement in CPD activities in 2023 (n=236)

The reasons for non–participation listed by the respondents suggest the existence of numerous barriers faced by interpreters to their involvement in CPD initiatives. Some of them (n=21) cited financial constraints while others (n=18) noted a lack of relevant training opportunities. A smaller group (n=7) expressed a belief that their skills did not require further improvement.

	0	5	10	15	20	25
I can't afford it.					21 27,3%	
There are no trainings that interest me.				18 23,4%		
Trainings and courses are free.			12 15,6%			
Other responses.			11 14,3%			
I don't need to improve my skills.		7 9,1%				
I am immersed in a deaf environment.	3 3,9%					
Trainings are held too far away.	3 3,9%					
I don't have time.	2 2,6%					
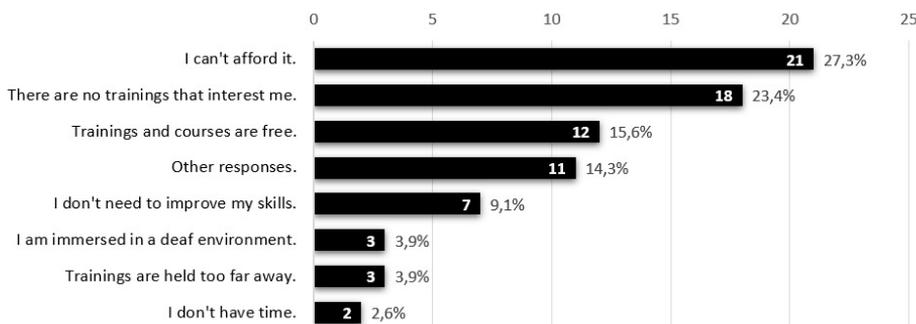
Figure 10. Reasons why respondents do not allocate funds to pro–fessional skills development annually (n=77)

Among signed language interpreters who actively participated in CPD initiatives in 2023, the most common activities were language training (68.7%) and conferences (41.4%).

6.   CPD in close–up

While the census did not differentiate between structured and unstructured CPD activities, a doctoral student from the Jagiellonian University (Cracow), Michał Koziol, conducted a smaller–scale survey study in 2023 that took this distinction into account. When asked, "Have you used organised forms of professional development for improving your skills?" 77% of his respond–ents (n=47) replied affirmatively.

Interestingly, the same percentage of respondents also reported engaging in self-directed learning, indicating a balance between structured and unstructured CPD activities.

The chart below illustrates the most common structured activities undertaken by the respondents. Workshops were the most popular form of CPD, with 72.3% of the participants listing them as their primary type of structured professional development. Courses (57.4%) and conferences (48.9%) also featured prominently. Other forms, such as webinars, training sessions, and higher education programmes, were less frequent but still notable.
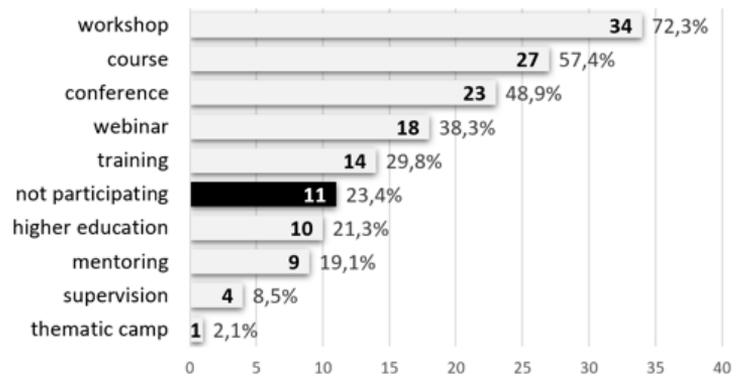
Figure 11. Structured CPD Activities (n=47)

As for unstructured activities, the most common activity reported was observing other interpreters/translators or experts at work, with 35 respondents (74.5%) identifying this as their primary form of professional development. Similarly, 33 respondents (70.2%) cited preparation for assignments as their key CPD activity (though this may be a questionable form of self-development, as it could simply be part of their regular job duties rather than an additional activity). Analysing feedback from clients (53.2%) and reading professional literature (42.6%) were also significant, showcasing the diverse approaches interpreters use to improve their skills independently.

Figure 12. Unstructured CPD Activities (n=47)

These findings emphasise the dual approach to CPD among PJM interpreters, where both structured programmes and informal, self–directed activities play an important role in their professional growth.

7.   Conclusions and recommendations

The findings of the Polish SLTI census, complemented by Koziol's (2025) study and the analysis of CPD activities among STPJM members and candidates, highlight both the strengths and challenges of the profession. Having considered the Polish conditions and opportunities available to the interpreting community at this particular point in time, we believe that addressing the obstacles in committing to self–development faced by interpreters requires targeted actions across five key areas:

Education

Improving access to comprehensive interpreter education is critical. The fragmented nature of current training programmes limits professional development and creates disparities in skill levels. Establishing unified, high–quality educational pathways will ensure interpreters receive the preparation they need to meet professional demands.

Certification

A national certification framework is essential for furthering the process of professionalization of the field. Standardised certification will provide consistent quality assurance and elevate the recognition of SLTIs in Poland, aligning with practices seen in other countries. Importantly, a national CPD programme would be most effective if it were closely linked to a standardised certification system.

CPD Beyond STPJM

While STPJM offers a structured CPD programme for its members, the majority of interpreters remain outside this framework. Expanding CPD accessibility to include non-members is vital for creating an inclusive and well-equipped interpreter workforce. National initiatives can bridge gaps and bring the benefits of CPD to the entire profession.

Expanding the CPD Offer

In addition to broader accessibility, diversifying CPD opportunities is crucial. Structured training programmes, thematic workshops, and innovative learning formats must be expanded to cater to varying skill levels and career stages. Such initiatives will ensure interpreters can continually adapt to the evolving needs of the profession.

Supervision and Mentoring

Introducing mentoring and supervision programmes will address a critical gap in the Polish SLTI profession. Such programmes, already well-established internationally, provide interpreters with guidance, feedback, and professional growth opportunities. Incorporating mentoring and supervision into CPD offerings will facilitate long-term development and collaboration across the PJM community of practice.

By addressing these areas Poland can match international best practices, fostering a more robust, professional, and sustainable SLTI workforce. Moreover, the analysis presented here may serve as a source of inspiration not only for the Polish interpreting community but also as a potential approach for addressing challenges faced by the SLTI professionals more broadly across Europe.

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Remote interpreting in Italy: Analysis of the trend and future prospective

Manuela Izzo

Abstract

As a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, the profession of sign language Interpreter, in Italy, has been subject to a significant transformation. The demand of remote interpreting, similar to other countries, has increased exponentially. VRI, VRS, as well as online conference interpreting services have revolu-tionised the daily work of interpreters in just few years. The presentation will illustrate a research conducted on behalf of ANIOS, from a sign language Interpreter's perspective, to present a snapshot of this trend, with the objective to achieve a deeper understanding on how this will impact interpreters. Specifical-ly, I will focus on the working, personal and emotive conditions whilst interpreting within a bi-dimensional medium. In conclusion, the presentation will explore the future prospective for sign language interpreters, with particular attention to new technologies, accessibility policies and required educational pathways: challenges to be faced in order to maintain quality inter-preting services in what is an everchanging sector. Therefore, this will be a critical reflection on how the future of Italian Sign Language Interpreting might evolve.

Key words

Remote sign language interpretation, VRS, VRI, Italian sign language interpreters

1. Introduction

Distance communication technology has radically revolutionised the way people interact and connect, representing a fundamental stronghold for accessibility in all contexts of social life, particularly for deaf people. Through innovative tools and communication platforms, technology has opened previously closed doors, creating unprecedented opportunities for breaking down language and cultural barriers. For deaf people, distance communication is more than just a convenience: it enables them to communicate in real time, access essential services and participate fully in social, economic and cultural life, independently and in ways that, in Italy, were unthinkable only a decade ago. The digital transformation has brought with it a wide range of tools and solutions, most notably Video Relay Service (VRS) and Video Remote Interpreting (VRI), which enable deaf people to communicate through sign language interpretation, making it possible to participate in phone calls, business meetings, medical appointments and many other everyday situations. The ability to communicate visually (and textually) has truly revolutionised the way deaf people interact with the world, giving them both a voice and a space in society that were previously limited. In this context, then, the profession of sign language interpretation must necessarily undergo a change.

Since the restrictions related to the COVID–19 pandemic, the phenomenon of videointerpretation has spread massively in Italy. In fact, due to the re–strictions related to social distancing, online interactions have increased exponentially in all areas of social life since March 2020. During the same period, the demand for video interpreting services accelerated at an unprecedented rate, despite the fact that the necessary technologies had already existed for some time. This led to a growing awareness of the importance of ensuring accessibility to services for deaf people, ensuring fully accessible participation in the political and social life of the country. The growing demand for video interpreting services has necessarily given a boost to the profession of sign language interpreters, shifting the setting of the services performed almost entirely online.

As we shall soon see in the research commissioned by Anios, 67% of interpreters had never worked remotely before the pandemic and 25% had done so only occasionally. These percentages demonstrated a 7–point gap compared to the study *"Remote sign language interpreting in times of covid–19"* by De Meulder, Pouliot, Gebruers, according to which 60% of the interpreters surveyed (from the U.S., followed by the UK, the Netherlands, Germany, Finland, and Belgium – and six interpreters who responded from Italy) had never worked remotely before the onset of the crisis, while 27% had done so only occasionally. Today sign language interpreters face unique and complex challenges in mediating communication between deaf and hearing people. This context, while rich in opportunity, can be alienating for interpreters, who find themselves nav–igating the intricate webs of technology and the subtle nuances of sign language, trying to maintain connection and accessibility for those whose communication they mediate. Sign language interpreters face a unique set of trials in this virtual environment: the need to adapt quickly to new platforms and technologies, the management of the cognitive and emotional load, and the ongoing search for balance between linguistic accuracy and cultural understanding. Therefore, this study sets out to explore the context of distance communication, offering an analysis of the challenges, tensions and opportunities that interpreters face.

The Italian context

This is only a small research project, but it is the first time that this issue has been addressed in Italy. It is well known that in the European context there has been a conversation about long–distance interpretation for many years, but Italy has, unfortunately, lagged far behind, in part because of poor infrastructures, and the strong digital divide in our territory. The European Commission's "Broadband Coverage Europe 2021" report analysed the Internet connection capacities in all of the countries of the union. It emerged that there is a disparity in Italy between coverage levels in some regions and in rural areas.

Dividing Italy into the two macro–divisions of North–Centre and South–Centre, ISTAT shows a gap in 2021 of about 6 percent. In 2021, in fact, the degree of Internet penetration in households (through all available technologies) was 83.3 percent in the Centre–North versus 77.6 percent in the South.

Although the digitisation of the Italian territory is advancing quite rapidly, with progressive implementations of "ultra–wideband" infrastructure, territorial gaps are still significant. In Italy, to date, there are large areas where inhabitants do not have an internet connection and, therefore, are denied the fundamental rights of universal service and the civil and political freedoms related to the principle of digital citizenship.

Moreover, in a global context of challenges related to the Gender Digital Divide, Italy currently ranks 24th in reports on gender equality in the use of digital tools. The issue of Internet user skills emerges as the

most critical issue, with only 28 percent of Italian women possessing elementary digital literacy, in sharp contrast to 45 percent of the male population.

The process of digitising the public administration has marked a partial change in the fate of a country that, while initially reticent toward new technologies, has begun to gradually embrace digital transformation. However, in spite of this change, interventions aimed at surpassing or at least equaling the achievements of other European states have not yet been implemented.

2.   Methodology

The research has two main phases: a quantitative analysis and an in-depth qual-itative analysis.

Quantitative analysis

The sample of the quantitative analysis consists of 127 respondents who are Italian sign language interpreters. To collect the quantitative data, an online questionnaire was administered between May and July 2024, organised so as to investigate several topic areas, including:

- Demographic data: age, gender, educational qualification, region of origin, years of professional experience.
- Remote work experience: previous remote work experience, current frequen-cy, hours per week dedicated, remote work locations, platforms used.
- Professional classification: contract type (freelance, employee), employment in VRI/VRS services.
- Perception of cognitive load and stress: assessment of cognitive load in com-parison with in-person interpretation, stressors, coping strategies adopted, burnout experiences.
- Preferences and attitudes: preference for remote or in-presence work, reasons for preferences, expectations for the future.

Qualitative analysis

Following the quantitative analysis, an in-depth qualitative analysis was con-ducted, involving 37 interpreters from the initial sample. These interpreters were selected to participate in semi-structured interviews conducted by tele-phone, e-mail, or video call. The objective of the qualitative interviews was to deepen and motivate the responses provided in the quantitative phase by ex-ploring in detail the interpreters' experiences, perceptions, and opinions about video interpreting. The thematic areas explored in the qualitative interviews included:

- Specific training received for distance interpreting.
- Preferences for online or in-person settings and motivations.
- Stressors related to working at a distance, coping strategies, impact on per-sonal well-being.
- Strengths and critical aspects of video-interpreting.
- Strategies used to improve the quality of remote service, technologies used.

- Perception of the role of technology and skills needed.

3. Analysis

The research opens with an overview of the Italian context, highlighting how the COVID-19 pandemic acted as a catalyst for the massive spread of video-interpretation. Restrictions related to social distancing forced an exponential increase in online interactions, in all areas of social life. Against this backdrop, the demand for video-interpreting services experienced an unprecedented acceleration, despite the fact that the technologies that made it possible had been available for some time. This boom generated a growing awareness of the importance of ensuring the accessibility of services for deaf people as a fundamental right for participation in the political and social life of the country.

Anios research data confirm the rapid transition to video-interpreting during the pandemic. Of the interpreters surveyed, 67% had never worked remotely before the pandemic, while an additional 25% had done so only occasionally. Only a minority, 8%, had prior experience with frequent remote work. These data high-light a radical and abrupt change in the professional landscape of LIS interpret-ers in Italy.

Interestingly, these data deviate slightly from a 2020 European study ("Remote sign language interpreting in times of Covid-19" by De Meulder, Pouliot, Ge-bruers), which reported that 60 percent of European interpreters had no pre-pandemic remote experience, and 27 percent had worked remotely occasionally. The 7 percentage point gap might suggest a greater initial resistance to remote work in Italy, perhaps related to cultural or infrastructural factors, later over-come by the necessity imposed by the pandemic.

Digital divide and territorial disparities

The study highlights how the Italian context is characterised by a significant "digital divide," both territorial and by gender. The European Commission's "Broadband Coverage Europe 2021" report confirms the disparity in internet connection coverage between Italian regions and rural areas. ISTAT 2021 shows a 6 percent gap in the degree of internet penetration in households between the Centre-North (83.3 percent) and the South (77.6 percent). This infrastructural disparity may be a barrier to equitable access to video-interpreting services, limiting opportunities for deaf people living in areas with lower connectivity.

Demographic analysis of the sample

The demographic analysis of the sample of 127 interpreters provides a detailed picture of the profession in Italy:

- **Age:** The average age of the sample is 41 years, with a maximum age of 67 and a minimum age of 24. This average suggests a mature profession, but also one with active generational turnover.

- **Gender:** The LIS interpreting profession in Italy is strongly female. 86% of the sample are women, 12% men, and 2% prefer not to specify.

- **Educational qualification:** The educational level of interpreters is high. Twenty percent hold a Bachelor's Degree; 32 percent a Master's Degree; 15 percent a specialisation course or Doc-toral Degree, for a total of 67 percent with an academic education. Only 33% stopped their studies after receiving a Secondary School Diploma. These data underscore the increasing professionalisation and specialisation of the job of LIS interpreter, which requires in-creasingly sophisticated linguistic, cultural and technical skills.

- **Region of origin:** The regional distribution of the sample partly reflects the geography of the profession in Italy. The regions with the largest representa-tion are Lazio (about 50 interpre-ters), followed by Veneto, Lombardy, Emi-lia-Romagna and Tuscany. Regions such as Abruzzo, Basilicata and Sicily have a much more limited presence. This distribution could be related to the concentration of services for deaf people and interpreter training centres in the North-Central regions.

- **Years of experience:** The professional experience of the sample is varied. The majority, 49.2%, have more than 10 years of experience. 23% have between 7 and 10 years of experience; 12.7% between 1 and 3 years; 10.3% between 4 and 6 years; only 4.8% have less than 1 year of experi-ence.

Transition to remote work and current practices

As already pointed out, most of the interpreters had no prior experience in re-mote work. However, since the pandemic, the situation has radically changed. The questionnaire also investigated the current frequency of distance work. The most significant finding is that 49% of the sample currently devotes less than 5 hours per week to remote interpretation services. An additional 26% do not currently work remotely; 11% devote between 5 and 10 hours to it; 8% be-tween 10 and 20 hours; 6% report working remotely more than 20 hours per week.

- **Remote work location:** The vast majority of interpreters, 81.4%, work from home for remote services. Only 18.6 percent say they also have an employer-provided space and use both solutions. This figure highlights the often au-tonomous and independent nature of the profession, in which interpreters must self-manage their work environment.

- **Platforms used:** The research investigates the video conferencing platforms most used by interpreters. Zoom emerges as the dominant platform, used by 90.3 percent of the sample. This is followed by Meet (73.5 percent), Teams (55.8 percent), Webex (24.8 percent), and Whatsapp (29.2 percent). The variety of platforms used underscores the need for interpreters to be flexible and adaptable to different technological tools, although Zoom seems to have established a leading position in the field.

- **Collaboration with colleagues online:** The research also explores how col-leagues collaborate during online conferences. 8% of interpreters say they work with their colleague on the same platform, leaving their webcams open. 30.01% use another platform contextually. 37% say they are unable to work with a supportive colleague online, and 24% indicate other ways. These data highlight the challenges of remote collaboration and the need to develop ef-fective

strategies for online teamwork. The 24 percent who say they use other modalities do so due to the fact that respondents in the sample are mostly from regional concentrations. The strategy, investigated in the qualitative analysis, appears to be to work remotely for the client, but in the same physical location (mostly at the home of one of the interpreters).

Cognitive load, stress, and wellbeing of interpreters

A central aspect of the research concerns the cognitive load and stress associated with video-interpreting. The majority of interpreters, 61.1%, perceive the cognitive load as being higher during remote interpreting sessions than in-person sessions. 20.4% perceived it to be much higher, while 14.2% perceived it to be the same and only 4.3% perceived it to be lower. These data confirm the widespread perception that video-interpreting is more cognitively demanding than in-person work.

Several key factors were cited as contributing to this increased load:

- General difficulty of a 2D setting (34.4%): Interpretation in 2D, lacking the three-dimensionality and nonverbal cues of the physical context, is perceived as more challenging.
- Lack of a real view of the event (63.3%): A partial and mediated view of the screen limits the perception of the context and the communication dynamics.
- Reduced ability to manage the event (56.7%): There is less perceived control over the environment and management of the event at a distance.
- Greater physical exertion (42.4%): Paradoxically, working remotely may involve greater physical exertion related to a static posture and prolonged concentration on the screen.
- Technology-related problems (56.7%): Technical issues, such as unstable connections and malfunctions, increase stress and cognitive load.
- Lack of eye contact (58.9%): Lack of direct eye contact with interlocutors affects the quality of communication and the perception of the relationship.
- Multitasking management complexity (48.9%): The need to simultaneously manage the platform, the technology tools and the interpretation increases the cognitive load.
- Visual fatigue (58.1%): Prolonged concentration on the screen causes visual fatigue, contributing to cognitive load.
- Problems in managing a support colleague (63.3%): Difficulties in cooperat-ing with a remote colleague can increase the individual burden.

Despite the challenges, most interpreters, 61.6 percent, say they have not adopted specific strategies to manage cognitive load during remote interpreting. The coping strategies most cited by the remaining 38.4% are:

- Regular breaks: The importance of frequent breaks to recover energy and reduce fatigue.
- Debriefing with colleagues: Discussion and support among colleagues as a resource for managing stress and sharing strategies.
- Relaxation techniques: The use of relaxation techniques to manage anxiety and stress.
- More thoughtful work planning: Better planning of work to reduce the unexpected and manage time better.
- Use of technological tools: The use of high-tech tools to optimise workflow and reduce mental load.

- Continuing education: Professional retraining as a tool to acquire new skills and meet challenges.
- Professional psychological support: Only a small minority use professional psychological support, suggesting a possible area for improvement in the provision of support services for interpreters.

A disturbing finding is that 40.7 percent of interpreters say they have experienced severe stress or burn-out related to remote interpreting. The main stressors cited in stress and burnout are:

- Technical difficulties: Technology issues emerge as the main source of stress.
- Lack of support: The perceived lack of support, both technical and professional, contributes to stress.
- Isolation and sense of alienation: Isolation and lack of social interaction in remote work can generate alienation and stress.
- Use of technological tools: Paradoxically, the very use of technological tools can be a source of stress if perceived as complex or inefficient.
- Work overload: Increased workload, often related to increased demand for remote services, contributes to stress.

Interpreter preferences and attitudes toward remote work

So, the majority of interpreters, 88.6%, would prefer not to work entirely online, with only 11.4% citing a preference for online work only. This finding suggests an overall preference for a hybrid work model, combining the ad-vantages of remote work with those of in-person work.

The reasons behind this preference are explored in the open-ended responses. Interpreters who prefer in-person work emphasise:

- Excessive stress load and alienation: Remote work, if protracted for many hours, can generate alienation, nervousness, and a lack of real interactions.
- Personal preference: The three-dimensionality of signs, direct eye contact, and immediate feedback are essential elements for communication quality and job satisfaction.
- Importance of human rapport: In-person work is enriched by human rapport and relationships with the various people involved in the service. It allows for a more immediate management of the situation, avoids technical difficul-ties and offers insight into the setting.

Interpreters who, on the other hand, value working at a distance highlight the following:

- Flexibility and convenience: Online work offers the possibility to work from and with any part of the world, manage family life more easily and reduce travel time and costs.

Technological challenges

The study identifies several technological challenges and critical aspects related to video-interpreting.

- Internet connection: Internet connection instability is a major concern, compromising the quality of interpreting and generating frustration and stress.
- Device management: The need to be comfortable using the computer, camera, and microphone during the interpretation requires technical skills and can increase cognitive load.
- Videoconferencing platforms: Adapting to different platforms, which are not always optimised for LIS interpreting, is a challenge.
- Latency: Delays in data transmission can affect the fluidity of communication and generate misunderstandings.
- Lack of specific training: The lack of specific training for video-interpreting is perceived as a significant gap.
- Technology skills: The need for appropriate technology skills is critical to effectively carry out remote work.
- Stress and burnout: As already pointed out, stress and burnout pose a real risk for interpreters working remotely.
- Simulations and best practices: The lack of simulations and sharing of best practices in the video-interpreting industry limits professional growth and service quality.
- Reactions and adaptations: The ability to react and adapt to technological and communicative challenges is critical for interpreters working remotely.

Suggestions for improvement

The final question of the survey was *"Do you have any suggestions for improving the remote interpreting experience?"* Interpreter responses provide a wide range of suggestions for improving remote working conditions. The responses were grouped into seven main categories:

1. Outreach and communication
- Raise awareness among clients: Many interpreters suggest raising awareness among clients about the specific difficulties of working remotely, pointing out that often only the positives are seen and not the critical issues.
- Disseminate information: There was a perceived need to better inform clients and end users about the functionality and requirements of VRS and VRI services.

2. Training and continuing Education
Many respondents highlighted the importance of continuing education courses specific to distance interpreting, including technological aspects and operational practices.

3. Technical and structural support
- Tools and Technology: The importance of having proper tools, such as powerful computers, quality webcams, large screens, and ergonomic chairs, was stressed repeatedly.
- Specific Platforms: the creation or adoption of platforms designed specifically for remote interpreting, with specific features to facilitate the work of interpreters.

4. Work organisation
- Dedicated spaces: an adequate and quiet space to work, such as a dedicated room.
- Planning and Procedures: Create a clear handbook and guidelines for inter-preters and clients, setting out standard procedures for preparing and carrying out remote work.

- Shifts and Breaks: Organise work in shifts of multiple interpreters to ensure regular breaks and comply with workplace safety regulations.

5. Support and collaboration
- Support Strategies: Identify and implement support strategies among col-leagues, including remote support, to improve coordination and service quality.
- Feedback and Communication: Use effective communication tools, such as WhatsApp, to facilitate the passing of information and support during work sessions.

6. Regulations and standards
- Health and Safety: Establish minimum standards for occupational health and safety, including technical and environmental requirements.
- Quality of Service: Set minimum standards to ensure high quality service, both in terms of equipment and operating procedures.

7. Psychological aspects
- Stress Management: Also provide training on stress management and tech-niques for maintaining mental equilibrium while working remotely.
- Psychological Aspects of Workload: Consider the psychological impacts of remote work and offer specific support to address these challenges.

4. Conclusion

This study highlights significant concerns about stress load, alienation, and lack of human contact in video interpreting. The absence of immediate feedback and visual and physical support from colleagues negatively affects the quality of service and personal well-being of interpreters. The remote mode requires specific skills and adequate technical preparation, which is not always readily available or supported by currently available technologies, especially in Italy, where the quality of the internet service can be an obstacle.

A recurring issue in the responses is the importance of physical presence to ensure effective communication and a greater understanding of the context. The three-dimensionality of the signs, direct eye contact, and the ability to interact immediately with the deaf user and the hearing interlocutors are considered crucial to the quality of service.

Observation of the phenomenon leads us to consider the fundamental importance of creating specific training paths for future interpreters (Del Vec-chio, Franchi, Izzo 2024 p.14).

This type of interpreting service delivery represents an essential phase in the evolution of the profession, and in an environment where technology plays an increasingly central role in daily and professional life, interpreters must be able to adapt to and effectively use digital tools to mediate communication remotely.

> *So, we believe it is urgent and necessary to train professional in-terpreters, but also and especially aspiring interpreters, in the skills needed to fully understand the technologies used, ensuring clear and accurate communication that is sensitive to the needs of the parties involved. Investing in*

training in remote video interpreting is crucial to ensure a solid and professional founda–tion. Only with proper training will interpreters be able to enter this sphere with confidence, self–assurance and awareness, sure that they have the knowledge and skills to excel in a rapidly chang–ing environment and are able to ensure quality services (Del Vec–chio, Franchi, Izzo 2024, p.117).

Since 2020, the great demand for video remote interpreting services has characterised certain aspects of the profession by introducing them into the routines of the many interpreters who had hitherto been physically present at an event, conference, meeting, lecture, medical examination, or any other type of circumstance. At first, in a time of emergency and without the experience of using certain tools, it was thought that the task of interpreting could be performed in the same way as it had been conducted in the past, but today it can be said that various types of pressures, unrelated to the interpreter's abilities and skills, have an impact that changes the result of the service.

Nevertheless, this innovation has generated some issues in relation to the profession of interpreting from and into sign language, which has undergone a radical transformation.

Acquiring and learning to manage the devices essential to online connections was the first, but not the only, challenge to be faced. We have learned that the Internet connection, the primary tool for this work, is not always stable and guaranteed, and is one of the aspects that increases an interpreter's emotional stress level. Interpreting is a task that involves a very complex cognitive process and video remote interpreting has added parallel actions, such as handling the computer, camera and microphone, or understanding and responding to the difficulties of deaf people, all of which increases the cognitive load of an inter–preter while working.

We wanted to prepare an initial survey precisely to explore a field that is still young in Italy.

After all, this is not only a technical issue, but also an intricate process of cross–cultural mediation. It is important to consider how remote interpreters navigate through these complexities to fa–cilitate effective communication between the parties involved, and to reflect on the socio–cultural implications behind building lin–guistic and cultural bridges (Del Vecchio, Franchi, Izzo 2024, p.15).

In view of several international studies, studies in this area should be carried out here in Italy and, above all, disseminated to raise awareness of the use of these services among users and clients.

The "non–presence" context has revealed that all participants in the online event tend to modify previous behaviours, but in what ways? Research and related analysis of real cases could offer reflections, if not conclusive, at least explanatory of the reasons and ways in which young people and adults adopt such dif–ferent attitudes when placed in one or the other situation.

The increase in remote work also raises important questions about sign language interpreter training and continuing professional development. With the expectation of a hybrid future for the profession, training programs will need to prepare professionals for the realities of remote work, including the technical aspects and challenges specific to remote interpreting. This includes addressing issues such as ergonomics, mental health and maintaining language skills in a remote work environment.
Constant updates are needed, which in Italy we can delegate to professional associations, schools and universities. In addition, it is essential to initiate broad and well–structured research projects; longitudinal research is needed to assess long–term changes in working conditions, the evolution of the labor mar–

ket, and the experiences with remote work of both interpreters and deaf users. Understanding these evolving issues will be critical to ensuring that the sign language interpreting profession can continue to provide high-quality services with the goal of full accessibility to the political and social life of the country.

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Remote interpreting in Italy: Analysis of the trend and future prospective
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The effect of Flemish Sign Language interpreters' career (de)motivation on service supply and demand issues.

Isabelle Heyerick

Abstract

This paper reports on a study exploring the sustainability of the Flemish Sign Language (VGT) interpreting profession, focusing on three key phenomena: (1) why VGT – X interpreters leave the profession, (2) why they reduce their working hours over time, and (3) why they increase their availability. A large-scale online survey conducted in 2023 gathered responses from 217 qualified VGT – X interpreters. The results reveal that, while intrinsic values motivate interpreters to increase their working hours, systemic, institutional, and demographic issues contribute to their decision to leave the profession or reduce their availability. The findings suggest that, at present, the Flemish Sign Language interpreting profession is not sustainable. The challenges impacting its sustainability are multifaceted and require the implementation of comprehensive policies that account for the demographic dynamics of a predominantly female profession (Orima Research, 2004; Bontempo and Napier, 2007; Napier et al., 2021; Gebruers, 2023; Michaels, 2023; May et al., 2024; Heyerick, 2024).

While the interpreters' experiences highlight the urgency of addressing concerns about professional viability, broader institutional and systemic factors—especially those influencing supply and demand—must also be addressed. This paper argues that a critical examination of the current political trend, which equates signed language interpreting services with linguistic access for deaf signers (De Meulder and Haualand, 2021; Heyerick, 2022), is necessary. Failing to address broader issues of linguistic rights and access for deaf signers will likely intensify pressures on interpreters, interpreting service providers, and interpreting training programs, leading to long-term global concerns regarding both the linguistic rights of deaf signers and the sustainability of the signed language interpreting profession.

Keywords

Sign language interpreting, interpreting industry, career motivation, interpreting services, supply and demand

1. Introduction

In March 2019, CAB Vlaanderen – the sole agency to provide signed language interpreting services in Flanders (Belgium) – issued a special report calling for urgent actions to activate (sic) more signed language interpreters in Flanders (CAB Vlaanderen, 2019). They reported facing issues to meet their operational objectives because of the increasing demand for signed language interpreting services and

a lack of available interpreters.

As a government-funded agency, CAB Vlaanderen is required to operate under an equal opportunity policy, which mandates that all deaf interpreting service users receive services in an equitable manner. However, faced with a shortage of available interpreters in certain regions of Flanders and specific settings, the agency is unable to fully adhere to this policy (CAB Vlaanderen, 2024a).

In their special report, CAB Vlaanderen points to three aspects causing supply problems: first, a lack of interpreter graduates; second, a shortage of VGT-X interpreters working full-time; and third, an increased demand for interpreting services (CAB Vlaanderen, 2019). In their 2023 annual report, the interpreting agency estimates that there are 48 full-time signed language interpreters in Flanders—defined as interpreters who work more than 700 hours per year in CAB-mediated settings (CAB Vlaanderen, 2024b).

It is important to note that signed language interpreters in Flanders are self-employed. They can either accept assignments mediated by CAB Vlaanderen—which are paid through government funding at a fixed hourly rate—or work directly with clients, with whom they can negotiate their own fees. CAB Vlaanderen only holds statistical data on the assignments mediated through their agency, which point to a supply-and-demand issue. Demand for VGT interpreting services has increased over the years, driven by political decisions to expand deaf VGT signers' rights to interpreting services across all domains of life in order to ensure linguistic access.

The generally accepted idea that linguistic access for deaf signers equates the provision of signed language interpreting services has been critically addressed by scholars (De Meulder and Haualand, 2021; Heyerick, 2022). Not only has it led to interpreting services perpetuating an illusion of inclusion, becoming a quick fix for access and inclusion, and the instutionalised norm (Russell, 2007; Russell and Winston, 2014; De Meulder and Haualand, 2021), it also contributes to the supply and demand issues of signed language interpreting services many countries are currently facing (Heyerick, in press). The specific issues in Flanders are also highlighted by the Flemish Deaf Association (Doof Vlaanderen), which notes an insufficient number of interpreters in their 2024 memorandum addressed to newly elected Flemish government representatives and ministers (Doof Vlaanderen, 2024). Similarly, the professional association of VGT interpreters (BVGT), which collaborates closely with Doof Vlaanderen and CAB Vlaanderen, advocates for policies to address the current supply and demand issues.

Currently, a deeper understanding of the sustainability of the profession is lacking and the discourse tends to focus on the "shortage" of interpreters. However, a more critical lens considering the institutionalised and systemic issues surrounding signed language interpreting as a service on the one hand, and as a profession on the other hand, is necessary to address the issues at hand. Since the global political trend is to provide linguistic access for deaf signers primarily through signed language interpreting services—rather than alternatives such as language-concordant services (De Meulder and Haualand, 2021; Heyerick, 2022)—we can expect demand to continue increasing in the future. We need to deepen discussions around what truly constitutes a shortage of signed language interpreters and what causes supply and demand issues—whether this involves too few people obtaining the necessary qualifications to work as interpreters, too few graduates entering the profession, or too few who are able to make it their full-time occupation.

While current discourse often emphasises the need for more graduates in signed language interpreting, placing the onus on interpreter training programmes to increase graduation numbers raises ethical

concerns. It risks training individuals to enter a profession that, in its current state, may not be viable or sustainable. Addressing the present supply and demand issues requires a broader perspective—one that considers the full range of contextual factors. Only then can we identify workable and desirable solutions that meet the needs of interpreting service users, support interpreters themselves, and establish shared responsibility for building a sustainable professional ecosystem (Venturi, 2017).

In 2023, a large-scale survey was conducted to gain insights into the sustainability of the signed language interpreting profession in Flanders. Anyone who had obtained the qualification needed to work as a VGT – X interpreter was invited to take part in the questionnaire. Based on statistical information collected by CAB Vlaanderen up to 2022[1], approximately 445 people in Flanders hold a qualification to work as a VGT – X interpreter. In 2023, there were 194 registered active interpreters, and as mentioned previously, 48 are considered full-time interpreters. Whereas the survey aimed to determine if the VGT – X interpreting profession is currently sustainable or not, this paper will limit its scope to three main results with regards to how the career paths of VGT – X interpreters can change over time. As such, this contribution will unpack why certified VGT – X interpreters (1) leave the profession, (2) reduce their working hours as an interpreter over time, and (3) increase their availability.

2. Researcher's positionality

My position within the communities I work and do research in, for, and with (Cameron *et al.*, 1992) influence each aspect of my research activities (Rowe, 2014; Heyerick, 2021). Critical reflection about the what, how and why of research has become an integral part of my practice, encouraged by scholars such as O'Brien and Emery (2014), Nowicka and Ryan (2015), Kusters, De Meulder, and O'Brien (2017), and Gebruers (this publication). As a hearing researcher, a qualified spoken and signed language interpreter, an interpreter educator, founder and vice-president of Tenuto (organisation offering continuous professional development for VGT – X interpreters), and a former employee of Doof Vlaanderen, I have privileges that allow me to be involved in and to conduct research.

My positionality influences my research approach, objectives, and the lens(es) I apply. This is also the case for this study. Confronted with the growing supply and demand issues concerning VGT – X interpreting services, Doof Vlaanderen explored possible solutions. They asked Tenuto if it would be possible to offer a refresher course for people who hold a qualification but do not currently work as a VGT – X interpreter. As the vice-president of Tenuto, I was included in these conversations and suggested that, before designing such a course, it would be important to understand what qualified but currently inactive interpreters need in order to (re-)enter the profession. This implied broadening the scope by looking at the sustainability of the profession. Doof Vlaanderen supported this approach, and the idea to conduct research was further developed in collaboration with Doof Vlaanderen, BVGT, Tenuto, and myself as the principal investigator. As a hearing interpreter who has worked within the Flemish context for over ten years and as an academic, I was aware of specific issues pertaining to the VGT – X interpreting profession and of global issues within the interpreting and translation industry. The research allows me to unpack the complexity and challenges of the profession, and to explore opportunities to improve the current situation. These opportunities could be adopted locally, but may also have global relevance—outcomes that align with my personal research objectives (see also Heyerick, 2021).

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1   Since the GDPR regulations came into force in May 2018, it has become more difficult to gather information about the number of people graduating from a VGT – X interpreting education programme (personal communication with CAB Vlaanderen (24.07.2023)).

3.   Methodology and data analysis

The methodology used in this study was an online survey, designed in Qualtrics and only available in written Dutch. To mitigate overrepresentation of my perspective as a researcher, hearing interpreter, and interpreter educator, the questions were developed collaboratively. I designed the initial draft based on a literature review, meetings with the project partners, and topical issues identified in terms of the sustainability of the VGT – X interpreting profession. The final version was approved after a three phased review process that involved gathering feedback from the three partners and additional experts (i.e., individual deaf interpreters and representatives from CAB Vlaanderen). Ethical approval was obtained from the research ethics committee of the School of Linguistic, Speech and Communication Sciences at Trinity College Dublin. The survey comprised 28 questions featuring multiple choice questions, open-ended questions, and Likert scale type questions. Branching was applied to allow respondents to skip questions that were not applicable to their context, which resulted in a completion time between 5 to 15 minutes depending on the respondent's context and career journey.

The survey was made available through a designated website[2] between September 23rd and November 11th, 2023. It was first launched at a specific event organised for World Deaf Day in Flanders through posters with the survey QR code. Additionally, the survey was promoted on social media, in specific WhatsApp groups, and through personal and professional networks by the project partners and the researcher.

The data were analysed within the survey software Qualtrics, which automatically analyses responses to closed-ended questions, including calculations of the median values to Likert scale type questions, and provides a separate summary of text answers to open-ended questions. Analysis was conducted at both the individual-question level, resulting in statistical descriptions, and across multiple questions to explore potential correlations between specific variables. I carried out the initial analysis and presented the findings to the project partners, who also had access to the survey data. Based on their feedback, a second analysis was performed to investigate potential correlations not included in the first analysis and to tease out findings that required additional clarification. The final report and recommendations resulting from the study were written in collaboration with Doof Vlaanderen, Tenuto, and BVGT and are published in Flemish Sign Language and Dutch[3].

4.   Results

This contribution provides an overview of who participated in the survey, how their careers as VGT – X interpreters evolved over time. It also discusses (1) the reasons why people leave the profession, (2) why VGT – X interpreters reduce their working hours, and (3) what motivates interpreters to increase their time commitment to the profession.

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2   https://sites.google.com/view/bevraging-duurzaamheid/home?authuser=2

3   https://strategicinterpreting.blog/2024/05/02/duurzaamheid-van-het-beroep-tolk-vgt-x-onderzoeksresultaten-en-aanbevelingen-vgt-nederlands/

Respondent demographics

The survey was completed by 217 respondents, all of whom hold a qualification permitting them to work as a VGT–X interpreter. As noted, CAB Vlaanderen estimated that in 2022, 445 individuals met this description, resulting in a survey response rate of (at least) 49%. The respondent group comprised of 91.2% hearing, 6.9% deaf, and 1.4% hard-of-hearing participants, and 0.5% preferred not to disclose their hearing status.
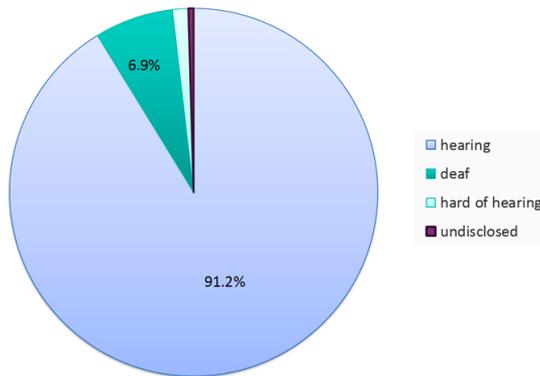
Fig. 1 deaf–hearing distribution respondents

The majority of the survey respondents identified as female (91%), 8% as male, 0.5% as non-binary, and 0.5% did not share gender information. These results show that the signed language interpreting profession in Flanders is predominantly female, which is a global observation (Orima Research, 2004; Bontempo and Napier, 2007; Napier et al., 2021; Gebruers, 2023; Michaels, 2023; May et al., 2024; Heyerick, 2024).

Fig. 2 gender distribution respondents

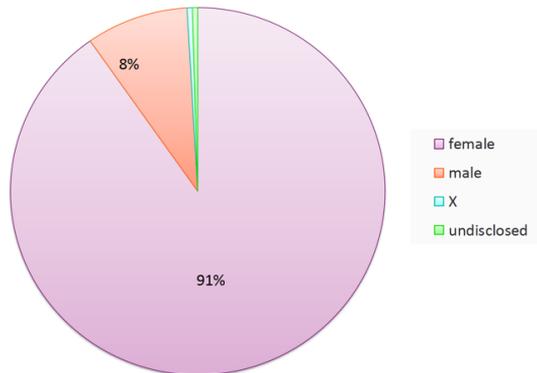All age groups were represented in the survey, ranging from 20 to over 65 years old. No significant correlation was found between hearing status and age, except that no deaf respondents were over 65. Most survey participants were between 31 to 40 years old (36%), followed by the 41- to 50-year-old interpreters (27%).
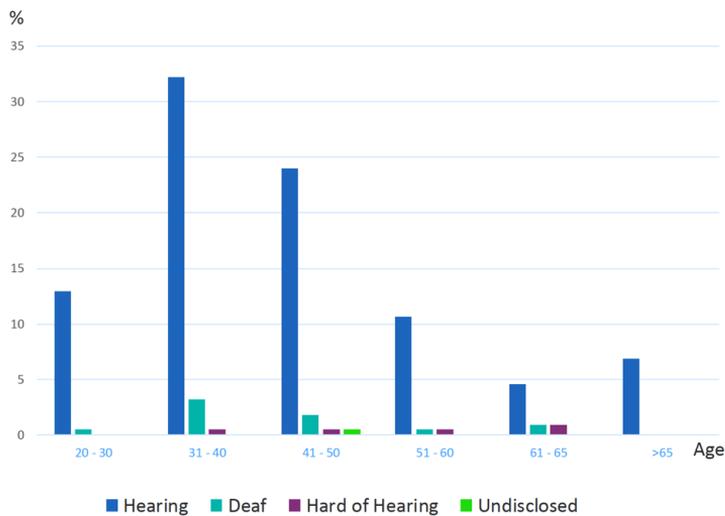

Fig. 3 age distribution respondents correlated to hearing status

The fact that most of the respondents are between 31 and 50 years old (62.6%) means that the majority of the professional population will reach retirement age within the coming ten years. At this point, there are not enough young and/or newly qualified interpreters entering the profession to make up for this future wave of attrition. Consequently, retention campaigns targeting younger interpreters are needed, and specific regulations that would allow VGT–X interpreters to remain active beyond retirement age should be explored.

Career evolution

Historically, there have been several pathways to become a VGT – X interpreter (see Heyerick, 2021) with the current Flemish regulations allowing registration as a VGT – X interpreter based on (1) a qualification from one of eight training programmes or (2) evidenced experience[4]. As Heyerick (2021) notes, the first signed language interpreting programme was set up in 1978, with a second programme established in 1981. Both part-time programmes were organised initially at the vocational level but became graduate degrees in 2019.In 2010, an additional full-time master's degree in signed language interpreting was introduced, which in 2013 evolved into a postgraduate-level qualification. In 2022, a one-time course was organised offering a certificate in signed language interpreting for deaf people. For a comprehensive account of the organisation, development, and evolutions of signed language interpreting education in Flanders, I highly

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4   https://data-onderwijs.vlaanderen.be/edulex/document.aspx?docid=14926#4

recommend the recent chapter by Gebruers *et al*. (2024) on the VGT interpreting profession. In addition to national training programmes, a graduate from the international European Master in Signed Language Interpreting programme (EUMASLI[5], established in 2009) can also receive professional recognition as a signed language interpreter in Flanders. Presently, five of the recognised pathways to qualification are still being offered (the two graduate degree programmes, the master and postgraduate degree, and EUMASLI). However, this will change in the near future with the closing down of the two graduate degree programmes following a political decision (Gebruers et al., 2024).

Survey respondents held qualifications from any of the eight recognised training programmes and their graduation year ranged from 1984 to 2023. Of the 217 survey respondents, 10% (9% hearing, 1% deaf) did not start working as a VGT – X interpreter upon graduation. The two main reasons were (1) that they did not feel ready, and (2) that the freelance employment status had a deterrent effect.

Since career trajectories are dynamic, we asked the respondents if their time commitment as a signed language interpreter had changed since they started working. This was the case for 53% of the participants. Four career evolutions were distinguished. Firstly, 25% of the hearing respondents who did not start working as a VGT – X interpreter immediately upon graduation, entered the profession at a later stage. Secondly, 43% of the participants who reported a change in their career increased their working hours (all hearing) whereas 17% of the participants (15% hearing and 2% deaf) decided to reduce their working hours as an interpreter. Finally, 40% of respondents whose interpreting career had changed since the start reported that they had left the profession—all of whom were hearing. It seems that career changes are at present more common for hearing VGT – X interpreters, which is to be expected given the fact that the professionalisation of deaf VGT – X interpreters is a recent development (Gebruers et al., 2024).

Leaving the profession

Participants who no longer worked as VGT – X interpreters were asked what motivated them to leave the profession. The survey offered 36 possible reasons and asked respondents, if applicable to their situation, to rank the relevance of the statements to their personal context on a Likert scale with 0 being disagreement, 5 a neutral stance, and 10 full agreement.

Five potential reasons did not influence respondents' decision to leave the profession, namely:
· because travel time is not paid
· because preparation time is not paid
· because there is no higher fee for evening work
· because there is no higher fee for weekend work
· because of concerns about my safety

The remaining motivators were classified into five categories. The first category is financial reasons and job insecurity; this includes financial insecurity, pay, job insecurity, insufficient work, a career switch, or a combination with another job. Secondly, we identified reasons related to personal circumstances, including work–life balance, family life, the need for structure or routine, caregiving responsibilities, retirement, and relocation abroad. Thirdly, administrative reasons were also identified, including administrative burden, professional regulations, collaboration with CAB Vlaanderen, and the self–employed status. Additionally,

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5   https://www.eumasli.eu/

we looked at health and safety considerations such as physical health and mental health (e.g., stress, the pressure to continually learn, emotional demands). And the final category, occupational traits, looked at aspects of job dissatisfaction (e.g., not enjoying the job, not being good at it), lack of feedback and/ or support, lack of contact with colleagues, expectations of deaf service users, expectations of hearing service users, expectations imposed on oneself, role insecurity, lack of professional advancement opportunities, and technical issues with online interpreting.

All statements were presented in an arbitrary way, encouraging respondents to take time to consider each statement and to avoid automated responses as much as possible.

The main reason why interpreters leave the profession is because of a career switch, followed by a personal reason, namely a family situation. Not being able to strike a good work–life balance also causes people to stop working as an interpreter. Five of the ten reasons why respondents left the profession (see Table 1) fall under the category of "financial reasons and job insecurity." Two reasons—the second and third highest ranked—relate to personal circumstances, while the remaining motivations concern specific occupational traits. The relationship with colleagues and deaf service users also seems to influence people's decision to leave the profession as do the expectations interpreters impose on themselves. It goes without saying that switching to a different career can help overcome these occupational, financial, and personal challenges.

Reasons to leave the profession	Median	Response number
because of another career	8.5	28
because of family situation	8.0	31
because of work–life balance	7.0	34
because of expectations I impose on myself	7.0	26
because of the pay rate	6.5	24
because of financial insecurity	5.0	22
because of lack of contact with colleagues	5.0	21
because of expectations of deaf service users	5.0	28
because of lack of job insecurity	3.5	24
because of insufficient work	3.0	12

Table 1. Reasons to leave the profession

Even though having insufficient work was not ranked very high (median 3.0), it is of interest that it features as one of the top ten motivations to leave the profession at a time where there are not sufficient interpreters to meet the demand. This result suggests that a more critical approach to interpreting service provision is needed. This is especially relevant in terms of what service users want from, and look for in, an interpreter—and how, even in the context of a general shortage of available interpreters, VGT – X interpreters still experienced insufficient demand, leading them to leave the profession.

Reducing working hours

Participants who had not left the profession but had reduced their working hours as VGT – X interpreters

over time were asked what motivated them to do so. The survey offered the same 36 possible reasons as those presented to the participants who decided to leave the profession. One extra potential reason was added (i.e., to protect the interpreting quality) resulting in a total of 37 statements. As described previously, these were ordered in an arbitrary way, and participants were asked to rank them on a Likert scale if relevant to their personal context.

Seven potential reasons did not seem to influence respondents' decision to reduce their hours working as an interpreter:
•   because travel time is not paid
•   because preparation time is not paid
•   because there is no higher fee for evening work
•   because there is no higher fee for weekend work
•   because of the combination with another job
•   because of concerns about my safety
•   because I want to protect the quality of my interpretation

Many of the main reasons to reduce working hours as a VGT – X interpreter (see table 2) are the same reasons causing people to leave the profession (see table 1). Eight out of the ten main reasons feature in both overviews, albeit with a different ranking.

Reasons to reduce working hours	Median	Response number
because of family situation	8.0	12
because of another career	7.5	12
because of financial insecurity	7.5	10
because of financial reasons	6.0	11
because of lack of contact with colleagues	6.0	9
because of work–life balance	5.0	11
because of lack of job security	5.0	10
because of expectations of deaf service users	4.0	8
because of the pay rate	3.0	11
because of mental health reasons	3.0	7

Table 2. Reasons to reduce working hours

The main reason for reducing working hours as a VGT–X interpreter is personal (family circumstances), followed by the decision to pursue another career. Four of the eight remaining reasons are financially motivated, pointing to financial and job insecurity and a low pay rate. Two additional reasons are related to occupational traits, namely the lack of contact with colleagues and the expectations of deaf service users. Whereas striking a good work–life balance allowed interpreters to increase their working hours, not being able to find this balance is a reason to interpret less. Finally, we note that some interpreters choose to curtail their work due to mental health reasons. Obviously, a career switch can offer a solution for the individual experiencing these issues, which explains why it was the second highest ranked motivator to reduce hours and the main reason to leave the profession.

Increasing working hours

There were also participants who had increased their working hours as a VGT – X interpreter over time. They were asked what motivated them to do so. The survey offered 25 possible reasons and asked respondents, if applicable to their situation, to rank the relevance of the statements to their personal context on a Likert scale.

One potential reason was not applicable to the respondents' situation:
•　　because of the opportunity to work with colleagues in a team

The remaining motivators were classified into six categories. The first category is "financial reasons and job security," which includes financial stability, pay, job security, and high demand. The second category relates to personal circumstances, such as family situation and work–life balance. The third category concerns administrative reasons, including professional regulations, collaboration with CAB Vlaanderen, and self–employment status. Additionally, we distinguished a category regarding flexibility which contained reasons such as the ability to work from home (online video remote interpreting) and the freedom to manage one's working schedule. The "occupational traits" category in this section includes reasons pertaining to job satisfaction (e.g., loving the job, being good at it, being *tolkfier*[6]), diversity, the fact that one is always learning as an interpreter, appreciation of deaf service users, and having a good relationship with colleagues. The final category looked at moral considerations such as emotional pressure and awareness of the lack of available interpreters.

The main reason why VGT – X interpreters increase their working hours as an interpreter over time is because they love interpreting. This motivator (I love it), from the occupational traits category, relates to overall job satisfaction and received the highest score (median 10). An additional six reasons hail from the same category and all point to overall job satisfaction. Two motivators indicate that interpreters value flexibility, and one reason is related to the participants' personal situation. The following table features the ten main reasons why respondents chose to increase their working hours:

Reasons to increase working hours	Median	Response number
because I love it	10	42
because of the diversity of the job	9.0	38
because of job satisfaction	9.0	41
because of scheduling freedom	9.0	41
because of the flexibility	9.0	39
because I am tolkfier	9.0	41
because I keep expanding my knowledge	8.5	38
because I am good at it	8.0	39
because of appreciation of deaf service users	8.0	38
because of work–life balance	7.0	32

Table 3. Reasons to increase working hours

6　　In 2020 the campaign #tolkfier was launched by BVGT. The organisation refers to tolkfier as a core value which exudes professional pride and passion (https://www.bvgt.be/bvgt). The specific #tolkfier is consistently used by BVGT and Tenuto in their external communication and #tolkfier stickers and postcards were distributed amongst VGT – interpreters.

The analysis reveals that reasons and motivators are interconnected. For instance, job flexibility and the freedom to manage one's own work schedule can support a healthy work–life balance. Additionally, we note that while a good work–life balance can enable interpreters to increase their working hours, the inability to achieve such balance was cited as a reason for reducing them. Whereas financial reasons and job insecurity caused people to leave the profession or reduce their hours working as an interpreter, financial motivators do not feature in the top ten reasons to increase interpreting working hours. The only financial motivator receiving a relatively high score (median 6.9) was the fact that there is a high demand for VGT – X interpreting services.

5.   Conclusion

In 2023, people holding a qualification as a VGT – X interpreter were invited to take part in an online survey concerning the sustainability of the profession. 217 respondents participated, and the overall results indicate that the profession is currently not sustainable. We found that the main reasons respondents would increase their working hours as VGT–X interpreters stem from intrinsic motivation related to positive aspects of the profession. The twenty-one recommendations developed with Doof Vlaanderen, BVGT, and Tenuto call for positive campaigns to maintain and enhance job satisfaction. The need to also focus on positive aspects of the profession is supported by the fact that negative aspects of the profession were perceived as less critical than positive ones. Reasons to reduce working hours as a VGT – X interpreter were ranked between 8.0 and 3.0, and reasons to leave the profession between 8.5 and 3.0. Those that encouraged interpreters to increase their hours were scored between 10 and 7.0.

Recommendations also took into account the responsibility of interpreting training programmes to ensure that graduates feel secure enough to start working as VGT – X interpreters, which is currently not the case. Additionally, the recommendations ask that professional regulations consider the fact that the VGT – X interpreting profession is predominantly female. On the one hand, actions are needed to increase overall diversity within the profession; on the other hand, the complexity and reality of a currently female-dominant profession demand a supportive professional ecosystem.

The main reason why respondents reduced their availability as a VGT – X interpreter was because of the family situation. This was also the second highest ranked reason to leave the profession. The majority of the respondents were hearing women between 31 and 50 years old (62.6%). This is conventionally a time in the life of a woman where the family situation stabilises, making it less arduous to work as a self-employed interpreter with regards to time management and financial risks. We noticed that respondents mitigate the unsustainable aspects of the profession by switching careers. Clearly, motivations are connected. A career switch can be a solution when the family situation changes and can provide financial and job security resulting in better work–life balance and mental health. The results show that the challenges the profession faces are not single–issue problems which can be solved by singular fixes. Instead, the complexity of the profession and the demographics of its population calls for multi–focus policies as, proposed in the recommendations.

Whereas this survey examined interpreters' experiences regarding the sustainability of their profession, further exploration of institutional and systemic issues driving the demand and supply challenges in signed language interpreting services is necessary. A more critical approach to the overapplication of interpreting services as a means to address linguistic access and rights for Deaf signers is also needed.

If not, the supply and demand issues putting pressure on individual interpreters, the profession, service providers, service users, and interpreting training programmes will remain a global concern.

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She holds a PhD in Linguistics from the University of Leuven (Belgium), which was the first doctoral study to explore which linguistic interpreting strategies Flemish Sign Language interpreters use and why. During her postdoctoral Marie Skłodowska Curie fellowship at the University of Warwick (England) she focussed on how discourses and ideologies about deaf people and signed languages influence interpreters' linguistic decisions.

Isabelle has had the pleasure of teaching in signed language interpreting programmes at various levels (vocational, undergraduate, Master, postgraduate) and to have been a guest lecturer at a wide range of departments at universities across the world. Additionally, she regularly offers continuous professional development workshops for signed language interpreter and enjoys presenting her work at various conferences.

Isabelle is also an active volunteer within the signed language interpreting community. She is the Honorary Secretary of the World Association of Sign Language Interpreters (WASLI) and currently the ISO representative for WASLI in the Technical Committee on Language and Terminology and the subcommittee on Translation, Interpreting and related Technology. She is the cofounder and vice-president of Tenuto, an organisation offering continuous professional development for signed language interpreters in Flanders. Tenuto was also a partner in the development of the first formal university training in Flanders for interpreters who are deaf.

Exploring Sign Language Interpreter Positionality: What can we learn from academia?

Karolien Gebruers

Abstract

Sign language interpreter training varies significantly across countries in terms of level, duration, and language combinations, often primarily targeting hearing interpreter students. Technological advancements, professionalisation of deaf interpreters and evolving discourses on diversity and representation, for example, pose ongoing challenges to these programmes. These challenges are often entangled with ideologies, biases and power dynamics, making it important to reflect on these issues to catalyse change in the sign language interpreting (SLI) field. In academic research, reflexivity – thorough examination of one's positionality – is crucial, particularly in qualitative studies, as it influences all research phases. Drawing from personal experiences as a sign language interpreter, trainer, and PhD researcher, I explore pathways for thorough reflections on interpreter positionality. This exploration also includes insights gathered from interactions with deaf individuals and deaf as well as hearing interpreter colleagues. The goal is to enhance interpreters' awareness of their positionality and its impact on their work, fostering individual and collective growth within the SLI profession.

Keywords

Academic reflexivity, sign language interpreter positionality

1.   Introduction

Already 25 years ago Metzger (1999) established that neutrality in sign language interpreting (SLI) is a myth. The field of SLI has undergone changes in relation to, for instance, level of education (e.g., in Flanders, Belgium, see Gebruers *et al*., forthcoming), the sudden shift to remote interpreting work due to the Covid–19 pandemic (De Meulder, Pouliot and Gebruers, 2021), the professionalisation of deaf interpreters in many (Western) countries (Adam, 2022), and the increased call for diversity and representation in the SLI profession (Francis, 2023). These developments make it timely to revisit sign language interpreters' positionalities, especially in a broader societal context in which identity politics have increasingly been a topic of debate. The Black Lives Matter movement following the murder of George Floyd, the #MeToo movement highlighting issues of sexual harassment and abuse, and the Covid–19 pandemic exacerbating inequalities are but a few examples (Healy et al., 2024).

Although, in theory, we know it is impossible for sign language interpreters (SLIs) to be neutral, prototypical

pictures still frequently appear on social media, often widely shared. These images contrast the 'working' interpreter, dressed in black (supposedly neutral) clothing, with the 'off duty' interpreter wearing a colourful outfit. The rationale behind black clothing is to ensure good skin contrast, yet this assumption implicitly suggests that all SLIs are white or light skinned, excluding SLIs with darker skin tones and reinforcing whiteness as the default norm (see e.g., Nuevo Vallin (2020)). Furthermore, the contrast between the plain 'on duty' and the colourful 'off duty' interpreter in prototypical images invites scrutiny. If we know that SLIs wear these colourful layers outside of work, can we truly believe they can simply shed these identities when entering interpreting modus?

This paper draws from my own journey of a sign language interpreter becoming an academic and being involved in critically investigating my positionality as a novice researcher. In addition, it is informed by my experiences as an interpreter, an interpreter trainer, a board member of a continuous professional development (CPD) organisation as well as by conversations with both deaf people and interpreter colleagues. The paper starts with an explanation on my positionality and reflexivity, followed by a discussion on academic reflexivity and will then continue with an application to SLI training and CPD opportunities.

2.   My positionality and reflexivity

Already 25 years ago Metzger (1999) established that neutrality in sign language interpreting (SLI) is a myth. The field of SLI has undergone changes in relation to, for instance, level of education (e.g., in Flanders, Belgium, see Gebruers *et al.*, forthcoming), the sudden shift to remote interpreting work due to the Covid-19 pandemic (De Meulder, Pouliot and Gebruers, 2021), the professionalisation of deaf interpreters in many (Western) countries (Adam, 2022), and the increased call for diversity and representation in the SLI profession (Francis, 2023). These developments make it timely to revisit sign language interpreters' positionalities, especially in a broader societal context in which identity politics have increasingly been a topic of debate. The Black Lives Matter movement following the murder of George Floyd, the #MeToo movement highlighting issues of sexual harassment and abuse, and the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbating inequalities are but a few examples (Healy et al., 2024).

Before discussing academic reflexivity, I will first introduce myself and discuss my positionality to provide readers with context for interpreting this paper. I am a white, hearing, Belgian, middle-class, able-bodied, cis-gender, feminist millennial woman who has had heterosexual relationships. Growing up closely with my deaf cousin, I was introduced to home signs and Flemish Sign Language (VGT) early in life. However, I only became fluent in VGT in my early twenties after completing formal VGT courses, which led me to enrol in a vocational SLI training that I completed in 2012. Through my close connection with my deaf cousin and, by extension, other deaf individuals, I am grateful to be surrounded by a supportive community of deaf friends and colleagues.

Having a background in Speech, Language and Hearing sciences, I initially combined my work as an audiologist, often working with deaf people, with interpreting until I switched to full-time interpreting work in 2016. In 2019, I completed the European Master in Sign Language Interpreting (EUMASLI) programme, which further inspired my research and teaching interests. From 2012 to 2016, and again from 2018 to 2021, I taught in two SLI training programmes, in Mechelen and Antwerp, respectively. In addition, I was part of the steering group of a deaf interpreter training held from January 2022 to June 2023 at KU Leuven

campus Antwerp. Since 2016, I have also served as a board member, of Tenuto, a non-profit organisation offering CPD training for SLIs. In 2021, I began undertaking International Sign (IS) conference interpreting work as well.

Currently, I am conducting a PhD study, focusing on gender in the IS conference interpreting context through an intersectional lens, at Heriot-Watt University in Scotland (see https://signs.hw.ac.uk/people/gebruers/). This overview illustrates how I have been privileged in having good access to education, networks and work opportunities. Although I am a first generation academic, my parents have always supported my educational and professional trajectory. When I was a teenager, my mother acquired a physical disability, which led to me and my older brother taking on care giving responsibilities at an early age. This experience greatly influenced my understanding of ableism (i.e., systemic and relational discrimination towards individuals with disabilities, Blair (2021, p. 78)) as well as of classism (i.e., a framework of oppression that determines our worth or value based on our real or perceived social class Blair (2021, p. 58)) and social (in)equality in general.

In summary, I acknowledge that my privileged background has provided me with social, economic and linguistic capital, affording me opportunities that have shaped the professional journey outlined above. This positionality influences both my interpreting and academic work in multiple ways. This paper includes both academic as well as grey literature to present diverse perspectives, and I have aimed to predominantly cite women, people of colour and deaf authors. In doing so, I view citation practices as a part of institutional reflexivity, acknowledging that citing is "a way of reproducing the world around certain bodies" (Ahmed, 2013, third paragraph). With this foundation, I now turn to the concept of academic reflexivity.

3.   Academic reflexivity

Reflexivity is not to be confused with *reflection*. Finlay and Gough (2003, p. ix) defined 'reflection' as "`thinking about' something after the event" (emphasis in original), whereas 'reflexivity' implies "a more immediate, dynamic and continuing self-awareness". Reflexivity refers to the experience of heightened self-awareness or consciousness that emerges through an interaction with another person (Qualley, 1994, p. 222). In other words, *being reflective* does not require the presence of another person, whereas being reflexive requires both another person and an awareness of the process of examining oneself (Chiseri-Strater, 1996, p. 130).

As such, the researcher should thoroughly examine the interpersonal dynamics between them and the participants (Finlay and Gough, 2003, p. ix). Accordingly, Finlay and Gough (2003, p. ix) suggest that reflexivity should focus on the following elements:

> "Reflexivity requires critical self-reflection of the ways in which researchers' social background, assumptions, positioning and behaviour impact on the research process. It demands acknowledgement of how researchers (co-)construct their research findings."

By looking inward as researchers, we adopt a subjective and reflexive approach to understand our own positions (Chiseri-Strater, 1996, p. 119). This introspection prevents us from distancing ourselves from the research process, from our relationship with participants, and from the act of transferring data into text. In

addition, we should ask ourselves how we make decisions regarding self-disclosure "both on and off the page", in other words, considering self-disclosure in written text as well as in interpersonal contexts (ibid.).

Engaging with reflexivity might be challenging, but in doing so, subjectivity in research serves as an opportunity rather than a challenge (Finlay and Gough, 2003, p. ix). In qualitative research, reflexivity functions as an element of quality control within the research process (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 37) and as an approach to enhance scrutiny and accountability regarding the researcher's role (Rodriguez and Ridgway, 2023, p. 3). Reflexivity should not be perceived as 'navel gazing', rather it involves recognising how the researcher's individuality impacts the research (Fadel, 2024). Individuals who do not engage with reflexivity might not possess the required level of self-awareness and, consequently, be unable to identify their thoughts and feelings, whereas others may be limited by a lack of self-confidence, fear of exposure or judgement, or a desire to maintain personal privacy (Etherington, 2004, p. 35). This practice is in contrast with what Liamputtong (2009, p. 9) attests in relation to feminist research: "[f]eminist researchers tend to admit unashamedly that the process of undertaking their research transforms them in some ways"; the "emotional closeness" to the research is made transparent. As she aptly describes: "Feminist research not only involves thinking but it is also about feeling" (ibid.).

In this sense, it is also essential to reflect on the process of becoming. In the first year of my PhD study, I documented my own experiences of *becoming* an academic in a blog/vlog, metaphorically describing them as going from wearing plain clothes as an SLI to wearing no clothes[1] due to the in-depth reflexivity (Gebruers, 2022). Pillow (2003) calls for 'uncomfortable reflexive practices' that steer researchers towards the unfamiliar, the uncomfortable. Although my reflexivity process has not always been a walk in the park, I concur with Etherington (2004, p. 25) who argues that by permitting ourselves to be known and seen by others, we create the opportunity to gain deeper insights into both our subject and ourselves, transforming this experience into a personal journey. In this journey, as Etherington (2004, p. 15) asserts, it is key to acknowledge that people are constantly changing, and their identities are developing, implying that they also make different professional choices as they grow over time. Indeed, in my master's thesis on the professional self of VGT/Dutch interpreters, the reflexivity section is quite limited, primarily comprising a discussion of my educational background and professional roles. In the final chapter, I recognised that my various professional selves might have shaped the way I read, analysed, and interpreted the data (Gebruers, 2019, pp. 70–71). Not only did I neglect my personal 'selves', but I was also overly cautious about discussing my influence on the research and should have introduced the topic earlier in the thesis. While the positionality and reflexivity section outlined above is more elaborate, including elements of both my personal and professional life, there are still some aspects I would like to explore further in the future. As Etherington (2004, p. 15) aptly attested, the process of becoming signifies movement, agency, and continuity, rather than an attempt to attain a final state in which we have become.

This brings us to the concept of social constructionism, which is a research philosophy that implies "a *constructivist* understanding of knowledge" (Heller, Pietikäinen and Pujolar, 2018, p. 8) (italics in original). Indeed, knowledge is the outcome of social interaction (Bohan, 1997, p. 38), people create it jointly (Burr, 2019, p. 122). At the heart of social constructionism lies the idea that the true nature of reality can never be fully known (Bohan, 1997, p. 38). Since reality is socially constructed, a multitude of realities co-exist (Berger and Luckmann, 1991, p. 35). Social constructionism encourages us to recognise both the world, and our identities as socially constructed, prompting us to see dominant narratives as just one of many possible, equally valid discourses (Etherington, 2004, p. 21). By understanding these narratives as social constructions, we can start to question rigid beliefs about their authority and open ourselves

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1   This metaphor stems from a conversation I had with Nicolas Hanquet, who is a fellow PhD student, SLI and friend.

to alternative ways of thinking (ibid.). This is in line with what Qualley (1994, p. 222) suggests regarding reflexivity and learning: "...reflexivity is important for learning, especially when learning requires us to also engage in "unlearning". She defines unlearning as a process that involves accessing, articulating, and re-evaluating our unconscious or implicit knowledge, principles, beliefs, and assumptions. It is important to recognise the personal, social and cultural contexts in which we live and work and to acknowledge how this influences our interpretation of the world (Etherington, 2004, p. 19).

Inspired by the work of Elsherif et al. (2022, p. 11), the UK Research Integrity Office (UKRIO, n.d.) provides a useful tool to reflect on privileges in academia, being the 'Academic wheel of privilege' (see Figure 1). This wheel includes seven intersecting categories: gender and sexuality, race, health and wellbeing, childhood and development, living and culture, caregiving, and education and career. These categories cover 20 identity types, displayed on the outer part of the wheel: (1) gender, (2) sexuality, (3) skin colour, (4) neurodiversity, (5) mental health, (6) (dis)ability, (7) body size, (8) care giver educational level, (9) childhood household wealth, (10) childhood household stability, (11) religion and culture, (12) citizenship, (13) language, (14) current wealth, (15) housing, (16) caring duties, (17) funding/resources, (18) career stage, (19) institution, and (20) formal education.

These identity types are all linked to three concentric circles forming the 'spokes' of the wheel and the privilege increases towards the 'hub' of the wheel. As UKRIO (n.d., 1st paragraph) states: "The effect of the concentric rings makes it appear like a funnel – the closer you get to the centre the more you're likely to spiral into more privilege".

Fig 1. Academic wheel of privilege (reproduced from UKRIO (n.d.))

This wheel of privilege should be considered through an intersectionality lens. The concept of 'intersectionality'[2], named as such, can be traced back to Kimberlé Crenshaw's pioneering work, which analysed three US court cases highlighting the intersectional experiences of discrimination faced by Black women based on race as well as gender (Crenshaw, 1989). She demonstrated that an intersectional approach uncovers a multidimensionality that cannot be captured when race and gender are viewed as separate, non-overlapping categories. Intersectionality examines how intersecting power dynamics shape social relationships across diverse societies and affect individual experiences in daily life (Collins and Bilge, 2020, p. 2). As an analytic framework, intersectionality considers categories such as race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, ability, ethnicity, and age, among others, as interconnected and mutually influential (ibid.). Abdi (2024) reminds us that terminology matters when reflecting on identity, power, and oppression. She distinguishes between intersecting identities, which describe who we are, and intersectionality, which concerns how we are treated because of who we are, particularly in the case of Black women. Considering issues of sameness and difference and their relation to power, it is important to reflect on "what intersectionality does rather than what intersectionality is" [emphasis added] (Cho, Crenshaw and McCall, 2013, p. 795). In addition, intersectionality is highly relational as it depends on who interacts with whom (Ahmed, 2017, p. 219). With this foundation in place, the next section will examine the positionality of SLIs.

4.   Sign language interpreters' positionality: applying academic reflexivity

Let us now revisit the quote included in section three above on the requirements of reflexivity and examine how it can be applied to SLI:

> "Reflexivity requires critical self-reflection of the ways in which *sign language interpreters'* social background, assumptions, positioning and behaviour impact on the *interpreting* process. It demands acknowledgement of how *sign language interpreters* (co-) construct their *interpretation, teamwork, practice, profession, ..."* (adapted from Finlay & Gough, 2003, p. ix)

This impact on all facets of SLIs' work and the SLI profession has been extensively acknowledged and discussed in earlier publications. For example, the work of Dean and Pollard (2013), introducing the demand-control schema (DC-S), provide useful tools to reflect on demands, or challenges, that can be environmental (i.e., specific to the setting, e.g., jargon), interpersonal (i.e., pertaining the interaction, such as power dynamics), paralinguistic (i.e., related to language use, e.g., pace), and intrapersonal (i.e., specific to the interpreter, such as feelings and thoughts). In addition, SLIs possess some controls, or resources, to respond to these demands, which can be applied prior to the job (e.g., preparation), during the job (i.e., actions), and after the job (e.g., supervision). Another applicable model is the role space model by Llewellyn-Jones and Lee (2014), which centres on the concepts of presentation of self, alignment with participants, and interaction management. These concepts can be mapped onto three axes, resulting in a three-dimensional shape that illustrates the 'role-space' of the SLI. This model was further expanded by Haualand and Ringsø (2015) to include the labour carried out by deaf participants to manage this role space. Obasi (2013), on the other hand, applied the DC-S model to illustrate that the demands experienced by Black SLIs may contribute to increased stress levels. This is a great example of how we can push ourselves further by examining complex identity dynamics inherent in interpreted interactions.

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2   For comprehensive overviews on the history, development and applications of intersectionality and its associated critiques, I refer readers to the work of Bambara (2005), Collins and Bilge (2020), Crenshaw, Andrews and Wilson (2024), and Nash (2019).

It has been documented that the effectiveness of interactions with interlocutors in a professional setting, like an interpreted context, may be influenced by factors such as gender, race/ethnicity, physical stature, appearance and attire, as well as posture and physical movements (Dean and Pollard, 2011, p. 163). In the context of SLI research, Sheneman and Robinson (2021), propose adopting intersectional approaches to uncover how social positions interact with power and privilege. An intersectionality approach is also relevant when reflecting on the dynamics of interpreted events, as these are shaped by the intersection of the social position of all participants involved (Chua et al., 2022). Considering my own trajectory, from being a sign language interpreter to becoming an academic, and drawing on the clothing metaphor, I wondered (Gebruers, 2022, 8th paragraph):

> "... might the thorough reflexivity that is required for doing research inform interpreters? Do we, as sign language interpreters, realise how much impact we have on an interpreted event? Do we investigate our identities and privileges in such a way that it feels slightly uncomfortable? Are we willing to take off our masks and plain clothes?"

Although there may be differences between countries, in SLI training and CPD opportunities in Western countries (de Wit, 2020), it can be assumed, or hoped, that issues of deaf/hearing power imbalances are included. Obasi (2013), for instance, attested that SLI training in the UK mainly focused on the deaf/hearing differences, excluding other differences and cultures, which aligns with my experience during my initial SLI training. As for SLI and CPD trainings, Francis (2023) documented that specific sessions on equality, diversity and inclusion are lacking in, for instance Italy and the Netherlands, and are scarce in, for example, France. Based on my experience, I can also confirm that the latter is the case in Flanders (Belgium). Francis (2023, p. 278) suggests that training programmes include "[t]opics such as privilege and power, unconscious bias, stereotyping, intersectionality, micro aggressions, cultural competence and inclusive interpreting". She emphasises the importance of incorporating different epistemologies as interpreters work with diverse communities. This diversity extends beyond what is visible, including aspects such as neurodiversity (Francis, 2023).

There is academic work available that thoroughly highlight issues regarding, for instance, ableist, racist and heteronormative language use (Henner and Robinson, 2023), questionable attitudes towards people's 'accents' (Hou and Moges, 2023), and unequal treatment of deaf interpreters by hearing colleagues (Sheneman, 2023). Master's theses have been written on the experiences of queer SLIs (Phillips, 2023), SLIs who identify beyond and between the gender binary (Hellewell, 2022), and SLIs of colour (Jacques, 2021), demonstrating the additional labour these SLIs are carrying out. This work should find its way to SLI and CPD trainings. Various methods can be employed to address these issues: debates, readings groups, visual and creative methods (e.g., photography, drawings, mind maps), storytelling, and more.

In this digital era, numerous resources are available to support our reflexivity and encourage us to engage in the work: blogs/vlogs, podcasts, newsletters, podcasts, social media, and (online) theatre. In addition, I can highly recommend these readings:

- Do the work: A guide to understanding power and creating change (Pillow and Gay, 2024)
- Read this to get smarter: About race, class, gender, disability & more (Blair, 2021), and the Instagram account 'Smarter in seconds'
- Gender: A graphic guide (Barker and Scheele, 2019)
- Why I'm no longer talking to white people about race (Eddo–Lodge, 2018)

Knowing all this, are we now ready to examine our identities and privileges in a way that feels slightly uncomfortable? Are we willing to remove our masks and plain clothes?

5.   Conclusion

In sum, reflexivity in the SLI profession necessitates a commitment to self-examination, particularly in understanding how an interpreter's social background, identities, and assumptions shape their work. Incorporating available academic resources and methods into SLI and CPD trainings can enhance reflexive practices among SLIs. By engaging with these tools and recommended readings, SLIs can better understand and address the biases that permeate their professional interactions. This work challenges us to embrace discomfort and confront our identities and privileges, ultimately contributing to a more equitable and inclusive interpreting profession.

6.   References

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Karolien Gebruers (she/her) is a white female hearing feminist from Belgium who has been working as an interpreter Dutch/Flemish Sign Language since 2012. Occasionally, she carries out International Sign conference interpreting work. Karolien has a background in Speech, Language and Hearing Sciences (BAs from Lessius University College, Belgium) and Interpreting (MA from Humak University of Applied Sciences, Finland). She is a fourth-year PhD candidate at Heriot-Watt University (Scotland), supervised by Professor Kate Sang and Professor Jemina Napier. Her research centres around gender in the International Sign conference interpreting context through an intersectionality lens (https://signs.hw.ac.uk). Her other research interests include visual research methods, positionality and reflexivity, collaboration between deaf and hearing interpreting teams, and the sociology of sign language interpreting.

Shaping well–being for excellence: A transferable model for navigating and promoting career practice and longevity

Omoyele Davey, Sarah Bown and Mike Ballinger

Abstract

"Sign language interpreters confront a diversity of complex situations in their everyday work... It is in part the building of interpreting students' cognitive reflective framework during training that will provide them with the necessary key tools for professional practice and lifelong learning. The creation of a reflective professional who is able, through a structured scaffolded training approach, to adapt to, cope with, and learn from new situations, will be in a position to support his or her own future growth and become an autopoietic interpreting practitioner" (Bown, S. 2013, p. 51–52).

Burnout has been identified as a widespread concern in the interpreting profession (Schwenke *et al.*, 2014), yet many interpreters report not seeking support (Lai, Heydon and Mulayim, 2015). Professional supervision offers one such strategy for support and development throughout an interpreter's career. Rather than something to be feared, supervision can be a collaborative, developmental space where interpreters reflect, receive feedback, and build the ethical competency, confidence and creativity needed to provide the best possible service (Inskipp and Proctor, 2001).

This presentation will discuss three distinct yet corresponding areas requiring a key focus within interpreter education and training programmes. Within the context of the mandatory UK interpreter registration requirements (NRCPD) & the UK National Occupational Standards in interpreting (2017), this paper presents evidence and arguments for the teaching and development of student critical reflective learning frameworks, which can, in turn, be robustly applied as returning 'frames of reference', within the journey to and of professional supervision. The embedding of these structures provides for a practitioner the ability to quickly identify vicarious trauma. It sets out the benefits of exploring the inner world of self–reflection during their professional supervision. We will conclude by positing a transferable model for education and training programmes, utilising key interventions and tools to promote well–being and safe practice to support the ultimately desired goal of sustainable career longevity.

Keywords

Work–related stress, trauma, support, reflective practice, reflective models, education and training, professional supervision

1.   Introduction

This paper addresses interpreter wellbeing through three complementary approaches. The following sections examine empirical research on work-related stress, explore reflective practice frameworks as coping tools, and outline professional supervision models that together support career longevity.

2.   Research Evidence on Practice Realities

by Mike Ballinger, University of Wolverhampton,UK

Over the past 25 years, many talented interpreters in the UK have sadly left our profession due to work-related stress. Interpreting often takes place in highly emotional settings, which led me to investigate the support and resources available for our profession and ourselves. Unfortunately, these resources were insufficient, prompting me to undertake a PhD study on the effects of work-related stress on interpreters in the UK.

Dean and Pollard's (2001) work supports using the Demand Control Schema and reflective supervision to alleviate the psychological effects of interpreting. Interpreters often experience stress and burnout without recognising them as early warning signs of chronic work-related stress. In a study of sign language interpreters and burnout (Schwenke et al., 2014), perceived stress mediated the relationship between maladaptive perfectionism and burnout. Maslach and Jackson (1981) identified that burnout results in distress and diminished work quality.

2.1   Methodology

The study employs an interpretive and positivist approach through a sequential mixed-method design that consists of three parts: a positivist quantitative online survey with 260 respondents, followed by 40 one-on-one qualitative interviews, and 10 individual case study interviews, all conducted in the United Kingdom. This phenomenological exploration takes place within interpretivist paradigms to examine how both current and past practising BSL/English interpreters experience and perceive work-related stress.

This study adopts constructivism and subjectivism as its epistemological stances, examining them through an interpretivist lens and employing an inductive research approach. It emphasises narratives, stories, perceptions, and interpretations. The research follows an abductive approach grounded in observations drawn from the research data. It utilises interactionism, phenomenology, and critical inquiry as its theoretical frameworks. The analysis methods used were descriptive, diagnostic, proportional, and prescriptive.

2.2   U.K. quantitative survey findings

260 interpreters responded to my online survey, which is part of my broader PhD study. 93% of respondents indicated that interpreting was stressful, with 85% stating it was very or extremely stressful. When asked if they had regularly interpreted emotive or traumatic content, 96% of respondents affirmed that they had.

When asked what type of content they had experienced:

- 94% of respondents stated they had interpreted intense emotions – clients expressing sadness, helplessness, or isolation
- 80% of respondents stated that they had interpreted trauma – clients explaining a traumatic event in their lives
- 74% had interpreted abuse – sexual, physical, emotional, domestic abuse, neglect, grooming, child trafficking or child sexual exploitation
- 73% of respondents had interpreted bereavement and a client discussing the loss of a loved one
- 70% of respondents stated they had interpreted violence (a client discussing family violence, sexual violence, or physical assault)
- 64% of respondents said they had interpreted a client being told about a terminal illness, palliative care, or family arrangements
- (51%) of respondents stated that they had interpreted serious distressing crimes such as murder, rape, or serious physical or sexual assault
- (22%) stated that they had viewed gruesome images or graphic content during an interpreting assignment

When asked whether they had sought support during their careers, a reassuring 92% indicated that they had, while only 8% had not sought support. With such high numbers seeking assistance, why are interpreters still leaving the profession and experiencing work–related stress?

The answer may lie in the ineffectiveness and lack of structure of the support that interpreters seek. The most frequently desired form of support among the research participants was peer support (91%), followed by family members at 75% and friends at 60%. When inquired about professional support services, 50% had consulted a professional supervisor, 33% had a mentor, and 21% had utilised the services of a professional counsellor, while 14% had seen a professional therapist. The research indicates that interpreters tend to seek support within their profession rather than using professional support services.

2.3   Implications for the sign language interpreting profession in the UK

Research data clearly indicates that 93% of practising interpreters face high levels of work–related stress. If this stress is not recognised or addressed, we may see many more interpreters leaving the profession or suffering from burnout, vicarious trauma, or psychological effects during their careers.

One resolution could involve early intervention in an interpreter's career. Interpreter training programs are uniquely positioned to play a vital role in the careers of graduating interpreting students. A potential 'buddy system' with an experienced interpreter might benefit those entering the profession. A possible category of para–interpreter could be established for individuals in the early stages of their career. Interpreters who feel they have greater control over their environment may have an advantage in terms of longevity.

We may be adding extra stress to ourselves and others in the profession if we are not adequately trained to provide support. In fact, 95% of survey respondents reported seeking help from their peers. Without formal or organised training to assist others, this support may not be as beneficial as we would hope at best and could be damaging at worst.

In the qualitative interviews, several interpreters reported experiencing peer pressure both from their colleagues and within themselves, which contributed to their pursuit of perfection in their work. Interpreters who strive for high standards may find that adaptive perfectionistic traits can enhance their performance (Bontempo & Napier, 2011) or that negative performance appraisals can impede it (Schwenke et al., 2014). Maladaptive perfectionists use coping strategies that are known to exacerbate and prolong the stress response (Flett & Hewitt, 2002). This well-intentioned support may heighten the stress levels experienced by interpreters. A more formal support structure, provided by individuals trained for this purpose, could be more beneficial for those working in the profession.

In the qualitative interviews, a pattern emerged where interpreters felt that a lack of control over their working environment, assignments, and career direction contributed to their work-related stress. Exploring Karasek's (1979) demand-control model, along with the benefits of decision authority and skills discretion, may help student interpreters more deeply analyse their work environments and cognitive and behavioural experiences.

2.4 Research findings

Chronic job stress in sign language interpreting is well documented and corroborated by my research data, with 93% of survey respondents indicating that they find interpreting stressful. Furthermore, a national shortage of interpreters is largely attributed to the prevalence of physical disorders and burnout within the profession (Dean & Pollard, 2001; Qin et al., 2008; Schwenke et al., 2014).

The online survey data indicated that 94% of respondents reported changes in their working practices since the COVID-19 pandemic, with a significant portion of their work shifting online. Bower (2013) notes that video relay interpreters are particularly susceptible to experiencing burnout due to challenges associated with managing the emotionally charged nature of the work and various environmental factors. With the expansion of video relay services in the U.K. and the introduction of an emergency 999 VRS service, this research may assist interpreters entering this developing work domain.

Bower also assessed interpreters and found that they desired more opportunities to collaborate in teams and debrief with others to reduce their stress levels. Previous findings suggest that allowing interpreters to discuss their work fosters collegiality and helps prevent burnout.

3.   Reflective Models as Tools for Re-balancing Practice-Related Stress

by Sarah Bown (Senior Lecturer), University of Wolverhampton, UK

The following rationale comes from my 30 years of experience in the design and delivery of University level interpreter education and training programmes. This experience has evidenced the beneficial results of reflective frameworks in both the classroom and practice. At the University of Wolverhampton, UK, I have conceptualised reflective learning as an integral part of an interpreting student's journey at both BA & MA levels. This successful design has been routinely praised by External Examiners, disseminated and adopted at UK and EU levels.

In 2013, I stated the following:

> *"Sign language interpreters confront a diversity of complex situations in their everyday work. To be able to consider and appropriately respond to such situations, interpreters need robust cognitive reflective frameworks to support them."* (p. 51)

At the efsli 2024 conference, I presented a case for the re-visiting of theoretical Reflective Models as tools which have multiple uses and benefits but fundamentally guide and provide 'scaffolding' for our reflective thinking and forward planning. The central question I posed was: Do these models also have the potential to provide a mental framework, to help us 'externalise' and temporarily project stressful thinking and emotions onto?

The proposed rationale behind this being that once projected, this could allow an interpreter the cognitive space to review and analyse the accumulated 'material', both during and post practice. Whilst the emotions can be subjective, this release could create the necessary distance to allow objective alternative perspectives to surface. This stress release could be considered a cognitive 'fire-break' and an essential feature within the overall tool-kit which supports a practitioner's well-being. It could be utilised solo, with others and/or during engagement with the professional supportive settings such as supervision, coaching, mentoring, or counselling.
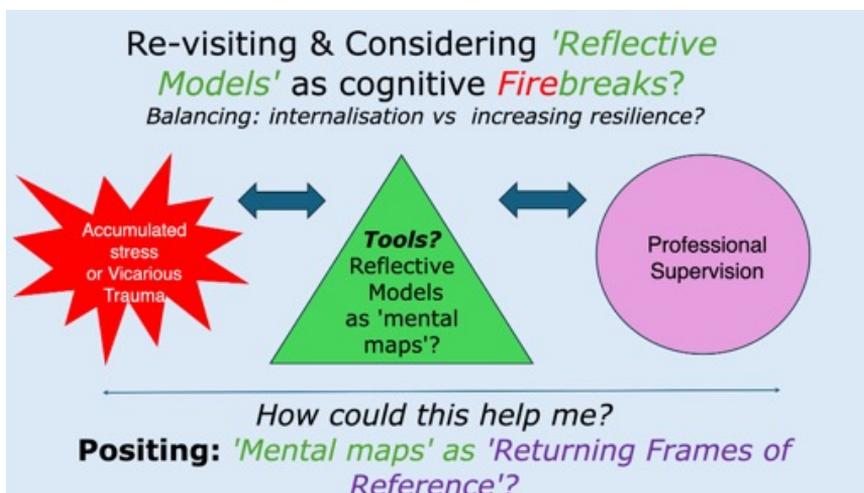

Image 1: Bown (2024)

The following discussion offers a glimpse into some wider considerations when utilising 'reflective models' – be that the thinking, learning, writing and crucially dialogue, all of which form important components within the activity of 'reflective practice'.

3.1 Conceptualising reflection as a solid foundation

Reflective learning is a long-established curriculum component in the preparation of students for future professional practice. It is viewed as an essential ingredient not only within education but during practice and continuing professional development.

"Reflective thinking is already considered a key component of interpreter training; the literature clearly supports the idea that [a] competent professional...should engage in...critically reflective practice" (Williams, 2001, p. 33). Reflective learning is seen as an "important educational tool" (Taylor, 2003, p. 244) that has been "internationally accepted" (Collin and Karsenti, 2011, p. 570) and is therefore widely used in higher education training (Kahn, 2006; Kahn et al., 2008)", (cited in Bown, 2013, p. 53).

Sound pedagogic and creative scaffolding implemented throughout the arc of a learner's journey is key. These solid foundations allow an individual to apply, adapt and sustain reflective practice throughout their career.

3.2 Existing frameworks: macro and micro

When looking at the UK's education, training and professional registration requirements, a number of macro frameworks exist to scaffold the practitioner.

For example:

- Education/training and assessment (including the National Occupational Standards – 'NOS')
- NRCPD (the national regulator of language service professionals) registration to practice including regulated trainee interpreter support and assessment cycle
- NRCPD mandatory Continuing Professional Development
- Adherence to the NRCPD code of conduct
- NRCPD misconduct/complaints processes
- Professional membership bodies for promoting and supporting sound practice
- Union membership (National Union of British Sign Language Interpreters, NUBSLI)
- Informal structures practitioners engage with such as peer support
- Formal structures e.g. professional supervision, coaching, mentoring, counselling

We know that professional practitioners from any discipline will also turn to the research literature in order to seek solutions to problems, advance knowledge and enhance safe effective practice. Over the past four decades, we have been able to draw on an increasing wealth of publications across all key aspects of our practice. This research has provided a range of perspectives, practice theories, guidance, tools, models, taxonomies, frameworks and strategies.

However, during those decades and running parallel to these wider macro frameworks, are the micro frameworks of reflective models.

Whilst often included in education and training, these can sometimes be overlooked to a greater or lesser extent, when out in practice. These reflective models offer tools which have the potential to yield many benefits and solutions for a practitioner.

Moving beyond definitions?

A range of well–established theoretical reflective models exist. Whilst the labels can differ, ultimately, the aim is the same. A structured framework to support and guide reflective thinking and analysis towards fresh perspectives in decision making. Each model has varying levels of guidance and can be selected according to the purpose of the reflective activity. Fundamentally though, whether labelled as e.g. 'models', 'stages', 'cycles', 'learning', all have similarities in that they provide a structured framework in which to place an experience and subsequently, drill down on aspects to help find solutions and alternative thinking.

From the many available some well–known examples include:–
Dewey model/'view' (1933); **Schön** model (1983); **Kolb** 'experiential' learning cycle (1984); **Boud, D., Keogh, R. & Walker, D.** 'DIEP'/learning (1985); **Atkins & Murphy** 'cyclical' model (1993); **Driscoll** 'What' model (1994) (from Borton 1970); **Johns** 'structured reflection'/model (1995); **Brookfield** model (1995); **Gibbs** reflective 'cycle' (1998); **Mezirow** 'Transformative learning' (1998); **Moon** 'levels' (2006); **Cowan** 'for action' (2006); **Bassot** 'integrated' model (2013); **Jasper** 'ERA' cycle (2013).

Most often we look to these models to resolve difficult experiences, however, these frameworks should also be applied to positive experiences. This is where we examine why an action/strategy was effective, and how its replication/adaptation could be beneficial for future use. Aside from this, it reinforces successful 'material' and experience, which in turn can support well–being.

One of the criticisms of models is that they can be seen as too time consuming to apply and often too confusing to use effectively. However, despite this, overall, there is much agreement across the literature, on the value of reflection within education and training. As Schön (1987) states, "an essential component of professional practice is one's capability to decisively reflect when faced with new, intricate, and diverse situations" (cited in Bown, 2013, p. 53–54). The literature does agree on the possible confusion around the conceptualisation of reflection for the learner, and therefore we return to my original view, in that fundamental to its effective utilisation for future practice, is the successful implementation of reflective models within education and training. The challenge for educators is to afford this topic sufficient time to be effectively interwoven throughout a student's programme, often in a learning and teaching curriculum where many topics compete for space.

Our internal world....

> "While experience is the basis for learning, learning cannot take place without reflection"
> (Osterman and Kottkamp, 1993, p. 3).

Whilst we mainly process the ideas and behaviour of others during daily practice, we could also give consideration to the 'material' that we store internally and consciously/subconsciously might project into the world. Do we know how we process and respond to our inner world whilst we engage with the external world? Our history, thinking, emotions, expectations and assumptions about ourselves and others, play a large role in how we respond to, and interact with wider society. This history can influence our practice–based experiences and potentially contribute to stress overload in professional settings.

When looking for evidence as to the benefits of undertaking reflective activity, the literature cites

compelling reasons to engage. The benefits extend from the professional to the personal for example:

- The thinking time reflection provides (Thompson and Thompson, 2008)
- To further understand practice (Khan, 2006)
- Building theory from observations/experiences (Owen and Stupans, 2009)
- To measure progress against goals (Kahn, 2006)
- Increased autonomy and moving away from rule-based thinking (Eraut, 1996; Petty, 1998)
- Self-improvement and adaptation of practice (Taylor, 2003; Kahn et al., 2008)
- Greater sensitivity & responsiveness to clients' needs (compassion) (Taylor, 2003; Redmond, 2006)
- Improved awareness of consequences and impact of decision making (Mumford, 1987; Lam *et al.*, 2007; Pope et al., 2018)
- Enhanced personal well-being (Stevenson, 2020)
- Increased self-efficacy (Kayapinar and Alkhaldi, 2023)
- Identification of personal/professional strengths (Beer et al., 2015; Ahmadi, 2022)
- Developing self-awareness/identity (Lam et al., 2007; Meierdirk, 2016; Alt and Raichel, 2020)

How we learn?

> *"Just as we all have different personalities, so we all have preferences about the ways that we learn".* (Jasper, 2003, p. 44)

When thinking about reflection and reflective models, it is also worth considering how we learn. Do we know our personal learning style/s and how it influences our learning preferences and further development? This could be one of the indicating features as to whether an individual leans to a more natural inclination or a learnt propensity for engaging with reflection –or not.

When looking at a learning style framework, an example is Honey and Mumford's (2000) who define 4 styles and posit a learner's individual preferences. Here they ask the question as to which you identify with. For example (in brief), an –

Activist: start quickly, new experiences, working with others, in at the deep end, leading

Reflector: observer, reflecting on experience/learning, planner/researching, detailed work/in own time

Theorist: involved with concepts, complexity, structure, probing, analysis, theories

Pragmatist: relating learning to work/real issues, practical, experimental, seeing an example to copy

Though you may identify with a particular learning style, a sound starting point for reflective activity are the models by: Driscoll's 'What' model (1994); Gibbs reflective cycle (1998); Kolb's 'experiential' learning cycle (1984); Johns 'structured reflection' (1995). All models allow for flexible use and once mastered, do not have to be applied each time in a formal rigorous laboured routine. The stages can be used as needed, in part or fully and they can be navigated and their content unpacked solo, in pairs, groups or in professional sessions with external support.

If we find ourselves resistant to reflective activity, do we know why? Is it a case of not wishing to re-

visit difficult experiences that we cannot resolve and in doing so, we fear that negative feelings could be reinforced? Is it simply that we don't have the time and consider it a laboured formal process consisting of an intricate format? Or, do we actually reflect effectively but are not fully aware of the process we have guided ourself through? We need to be kinder to ourselves and remember that actually, reflection probably is a part of our daily functioning, and a fresh perspective could potentially yield new results and crucially, solutions for us.

3.3   Re-calibrating internalised experiences

We have many choices available to us. Whilst one could continue internalising accumulated stress, stuffing life's 'material' into the back of the metaphorical 'wardrobe' and shutting the door until no further can be stored, perhaps instead, we could see reflection as a form of 'satnav' to help us on our journey? When travelling by car, each of us has a preferred navigation tool, e.g. A-Z paper road maps, mobile phone Google maps, in-built satnavs or a combination. Technologies allow us to plan a journey, predict difficulty, mitigate for it and find alternative solutions. We hit roadworks and tailbacks, our satnav re-calibrates and suggests alternative routes. We don't have to follow them, but this re-calibration provides options for immediate alternative action or for re-visiting the suggestions later on. The satnav, like a reflective model, can help us to see problems from a different perspective, provide a 'bird's eye view' and it can help us to find solutions. It has the capacity to hold the data of the 'experience' – it is for us to decide when and how we wish to observe it and then apply those findings to our greatest advantage.

4.   Routes to Practitioner Support

by Omoyele Davey, 360 Supervision

Image 2: Dekesel and Davey (2024)

Similar to the illustration of a boiling pot provided above, practitioners frequently working in highly stressful and emotionally charged environments can experience a sense of being overwhelmed by

mounting pressures. The intense heat emanating from the pot can make it feel hard to find a way out. The need to look after oneself and reflect is vital to career longevity and wellbeing. There are several routes practitioners can take to access support such as mentoring, counselling/therapy, self care and, of course, professional supervision.

4.1 Professional supervision framework

Professional supervision is a:

> *"Working alliance between two professionals where supervisees offer an account of their work, reflect on it, receive feedback and receive guidance if appropriate. The object of this alliance is to enable the worker to gain in ethical competency, confidence and creativity as to give the best possible service to clients"* (Inskipp, F. and Proctor, B. 2001, p. 1)

Various studies have cited the importance of professional supervision (Inskipp and Proctor, 2001; Carroll, 1996; Page and Wosket, 2001) and many refer to the three functions of supervision which work together to ensure the practitioner is safe, ethical and competent whilst maintaining their wellbeing.

Firstly, there is the formative/educative function which is an aspect of supervision that is mostly used with newly qualified or trainee interpreters who have limited or no access to information but can also be an integral part of a session for those seasoned professionals who are considering entering new domains and want to explore this further. If we are referring to the integrated developmental model by Stoltenberg, this would be when practitioners would find themselves at the first stage (Stoltenberg, 1997).
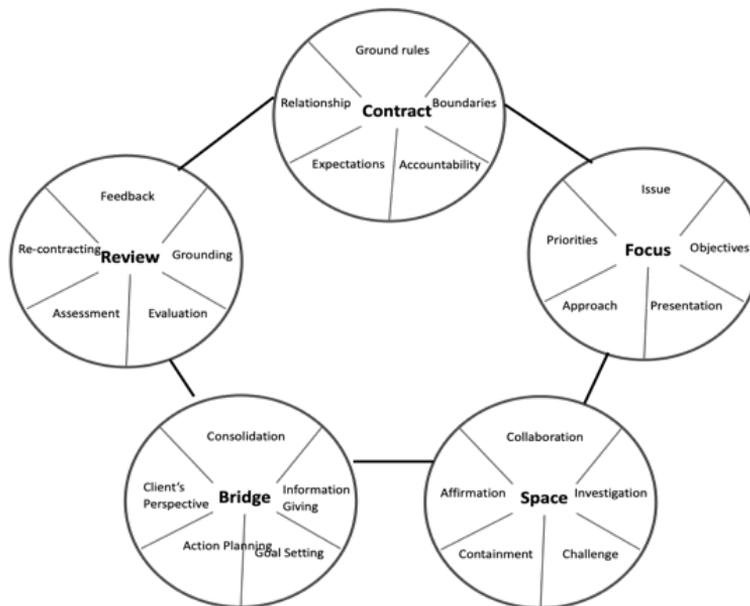
Normative or qualitative function is where the focus and real work within the session occurs, where ethical choices, accountability and challenge come in. Within this function, practitioners really reflect on the choices they have made and the effects these have had on the client(s). This aims to ensure that professional and ethical standards are upheld.

The third and final is the restorative function which focuses on the emotional and psychological support to maintain wellbeing. This aims to support individuals to manage stress, burnout and emotional challenges associated with their work. Supervision aims to provide a safe space to discuss the emotional challenges of the profession and encourage a healthy work–life balance.

Currently, in supervision with sign language interpreters, we are seeing practitioners spending more time in the restorative function due to the challenges that exist within the profession and so wanted to explore a model of support that would encourage a better balance within all three functions. All the functions are interconnected to ensure that supervision not only holds practitioners accountable but also fosters growth and provides necessary support. Effective supervision balances all three elements to promote better practice and wellbeing.

4.2 Supervision models in practice

There are certain models that are used within supervision that support a practitioner's reflective practice, the first of these being the cyclical model of supervision (Page and Wosket, 2001, p. 36) .

Contract: Ground rules, Relationship, Boundaries, Expectations, Accountability

Focus: Issue, Priorities, Objectives, Approach, Presentation

Review: Feedback, Re-contracting, Grounding, Assessment, Evaluation

Bridge: Consolidation, Client's Perspective, Information Giving, Action Planning, Goal Setting

Space: Collaboration, Affirmation, Investigation, Containment, Challenge

This really echoes Gibbs' reflective model mentioned earlier, with more defined stages of self reflection. The stages are:

- The Contract which includes the terms agreed between Supervisor and Supervisee;
- The Focus which covers what the work will entail and how each session will look;
- The Space which is the reflective, exploratory and developmental work that takes place through the process of supervision;
- The Bridge, the way the supervision session allows the supervisee to bring what has been worked on in relation to the bookings with their clients and finally
- The Review, which is an opportunity to re-contract and talk about how the supervisor's relationship is going, what is working well and what is lacking or needs further discussion and possible re-formulation.

The cyclical model is one that can be used with supervisees to model what they can take forward into the work-place with clients, they can adopt these reflective stages with their clients to ensure they are firstly – contracting and agreeing working terms;
focus – at each session they have with clients to go through the aims of the session and check in with what the aims are and how this can be achieved together; the space – to explore different ways of working to find the right balance for both practitioner and client; the bridge – where they can look back on the work they have done together to then end up in the review process – where they can explore what they may need to change going forward.

Within supervision, a regular recommendation is to hold review periods with clients, especially if you are working with a client regularly to ensure you are re-contracting based on what they discover together. This allows space for feedback from both parties to allow for growth and reflection.

The next model and one that is used frequently within supervision is the Seven-Eyed Model (Hawkins and Shohet, 1989, p. 56). It is a way of looking at supervision that helps people reflect on their work from multiple perspectives. It explores the relationship between the Client, Supervisee and Supervisor through seven different lenses or focus areas.

Seven-Eyed Model of Supervision
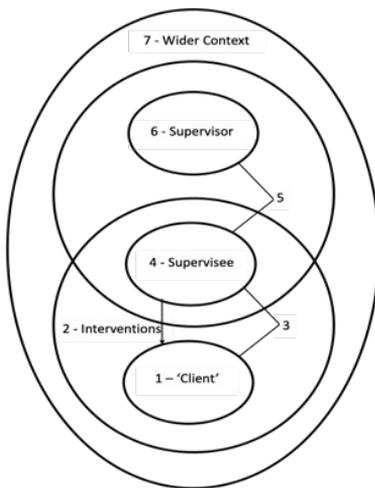
Mode 1: The 'Client'

Mode 2: Interventions

Mode 3: Relationship between Supervisee and Client

Mode 4: The Supervisee

Mode 5: Relationship between Supervisor and Supervisee

Mode 6: The Supervisor

Mode 6a: Fantasy relationship

Mode 7: The Wider context

The Seven Eyes (Modes/Lenses) includes:

1. The Client – Looking at the client and their issues. What are they bringing? What patterns or challenges do they have?
2. The Practitioner's Strategies – Examining what the practitioner (therapist, coach, etc.) is doing. What techniques or approaches are being used? Are they effective?
3. The Relationship Between Client and Practitioner – Looking at how the client and practitioner interact. Is there trust? Are there any tensions? How does the relationship impact the work?
4. The Practitioner's Experience – Focusing on the practitioner's thoughts, feelings, and reactions. How does working with this client make them feel? Are they bringing personal biases into the work?
5. The Supervisor–Practitioner Relationship – Looking at how the practitioner and supervisor interact. Are there dynamics in supervision that mirror the client–practitioner relationship?
6. The Supervisor's Own Experience – Examining the supervisor's thoughts, feelings, and instincts. What is the supervisor noticing about themselves as they listen?
7. The Wider Context – Considering external factors like culture, organisation, policies, or social issues that may influence the work.

This model helps supervisors and practitioners gain a deeper, more rounded understanding of their work. It encourages reflection, helps spot blind spots, and improves both professional practice and personal awareness.

4.3   Practitioner experiences

I wanted to gain a perspective from supervisees who had very different journeys on the path to professional supervision. I was able to gain insights from 2 different practitioners, one who had embedded professional supervision from the outset of their career and had been taught reflective models as part of their training at the University of Wolverhampton, UK. In response to the question of their view and experience of professional supervision, they spoke of "appropriate accountability, secure foundations in ethical decision making and the ability to critically evaluate." They were also able to "reflect in a measured and balanced way, with a better sense of the bigger picture." They were very grounded in their tools and models of self reflection.

I then sought insights from a practitioner who had spent the first 3 decades of their career without supervisory support and training that, at the time, did not embed reflective tools and explored what this offered them at this stage. When posed with the same question, they stated that initially, their "sources of support came from colleagues *exploring* an incident or dilemma." They were able to identify that "what was lacking was a more holistic look at their practice." They then referred to their experience of professional supervision and how they were "more able to express their thinking more quickly....able to access their beliefs, values and intentions."

Both spoke of the support that supervision could offer and of how they were able to move away from internalising and seek a more holistic view of the issues they presented in sessions. This really supported our view of the model we wanted to create to support career longevity.

5.   Conclusion

In conclusion, we encourage the embedding of reflective tools within sign language interpreter education and training together with the promotion of stronger links between training courses and the knowledge and opportunities offered by the tools of professional supervision.

An example of this is demonstrated at the University of Wolverhampton, UK with the Bachelor of Arts (Hons) British Sign Language and the Masters in Interpreting programme in the reflective/critical reflective practice modules. The embedding of these skills can provide fertile ground for the motivation to self–reflect not only during education and training but on the continuum into and during practice.

There are a great number of theoretical reflective models to draw upon. Selected carefully and integrated creatively into the learner's reflective educational journey, can prepare and scaffold students on their career path and lead them effectively into the tools of professional supervision.

Our model is one that aims to combine all parts holistically and ultimately create a self–supporting framework for practitioners to help reduce internalisation, embed reflective models and use professional supervision to create and shape a resilient and reflective practitioner.

The aim is for more practitioners to enter professional supervision with secure support structures. To spend less time solely in the restorative function and more time in the formative and normative functions where real accountability and growth can take place. This is not to dismiss the need for the 'restorative'

function but through the educational grounding of a wider array of reflective tools, they have the opportunity to be more sufficiently equipped in order to be able to move on from the internalisation stage into the next stages of reflective development.

Lastly, we turn to our final image of a practitioner immersed within the escalating heat of the 'boiling pot'. We have presented evidence, perspectives and tools to understand and assist that interpreter in reducing the heat, and ultimately remove themselves from a 'pot' where they may be experiencing stress, burnout and/or vicarious trauma.

The tools to embed reflection and the ongoing journey into professional supervision can become the 'ladder' out of that 'heat'. In effect, a practitioner who can climb down that ladder, is someone who has the ability to select, adapt and apply those tools for their ongoing well-being, safety and ultimately, position themselves for career longevity.
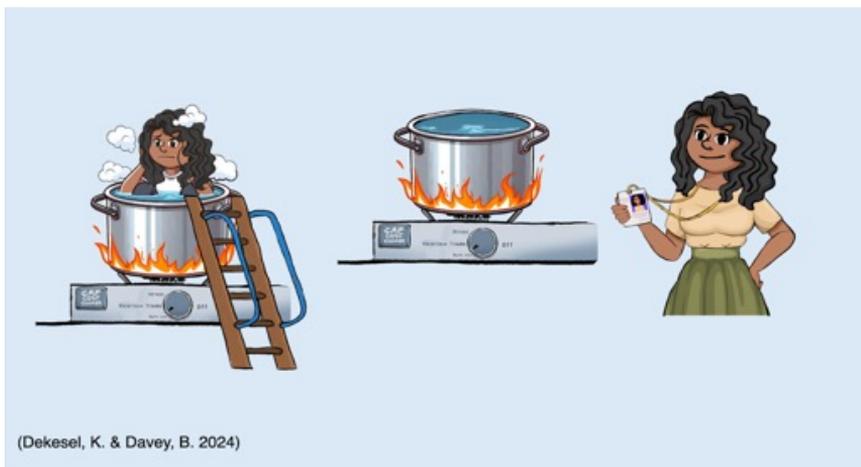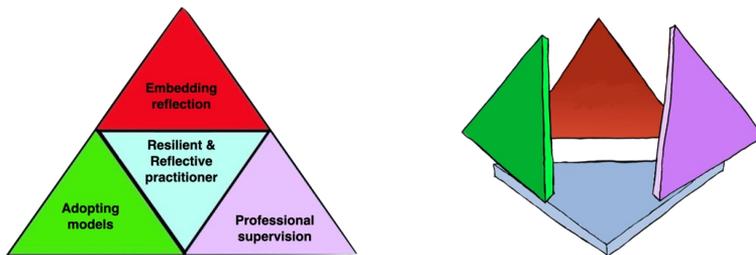
Proposed Model of Good Practice

(Dekesel, K. & Davey, B. 2024)

Image 3

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Professionalism and quality: Two currents of the same river

Patricia Bandín Trasbach

Abstract

A popular saying is, "many streams flow into one river." In the same way, many ideologies, people, cultures, and working styles come together in the practice of interpretation. The history of interpreting, like water, is a story of divergences and confluences, stagnation or flow. Just as with water, the same happens with interpreting practice. Interpreting has evolved over the years, and so has the training of sign language interpreters, both hearing and deaf.

If we think of professionalism as having two dimensions, the first could be "being," and the second "practice." Being and doing are interconnected in different ways across time and space. This reflects the profession being tied to a specific time and place. Moreover, as university programs in sign language interpreting grow, interpreters acquire new competencies—but can these skills taught by educators truly be applied in practice? Does reality reflect what theory suggests? What aspects of interpreting bridge the gap between being and practice? Which aspects remain separate?

To explore this, the paper presents both a reflective and an outward journey through university training and post–university practice. It seeks to foster an intergenerational and intercontinental dialogue that recognises experiences as a vital part of the theoretical framework for interpreting and academic programs. Achieving high–quality standards in the profession requires looking at ourselves from various perspectives. To understand where we are headed, we must first know where we stand.

Keywords

Interpretation, being, practice, introspection, extroxpection, professionalism and quality

1.   Introduction

In everyday life, like in the flows of a river, human beings face a constant interaction between what they are and what they do. This dynamism, laden with influences and nuances, is particularly reflected in the field of interpretation. The history of interpretation, like a river in perpetual motion, is formed and transformed by the confluence of ideologies, cultures, and contexts, reflecting the tension between stagnation and flow. In this moving space, the 'being' of the interpreter intertwines with the 'praxis' of interpretation, configuring a process in which not only language is translated, but also an experience of being in the world is revealed.

Following this idea, Heidegger's (2018) concept of Dasein (being-there) offers a profound perspective on the being of the interpreter. Dasein is not an isolated being, but a being-in-the-world, existing in constant relation with others, with the environment, with language. The interpreter, just like Dasein, is not a static entity; their being is constructed through their praxis, their decisions and actions at the moment of interpretation. Interpretation, therefore, not only involves a technical skill, but is a manifestation of their being, a way of being in the world, a bridge between two realities that, through the act of translating, encounter and understand each other.

In this context, a fundamental question arises: How does the 'being' of the interpreter integrate with the professional practice taught in universities? Sign language interpretation programs have grown, providing a set of technical and theoretical tools. However, the true question does not lie in the amount of knowledge acquired, but in how this knowledge is embodied in action, in the interpretive act. To what extent is the 'being' of the interpreter, understood as their life experience, articulated with theory and technique? What happens when theory and practice seem not to align, when the being of the interpreter comes into tension with the academic models that attempt to define it?

This work proposes to explore the journey of the interpreter from an introspective and extrospective perspective, basing it on the lived experiences of professionals in different contexts. The question is, then, how the 'being' of the interpreter is projected in the practice of interpretation and how both dimensions intertwine or separate in their daily practice. To truly understand interpretation, it is necessary to not only look at its techniques but also to look towards the being that hides behind each interpretative action. In the end, like the flow of a river, the path to professional excellence in interpretation can only be traced if we first understand from where we are flowing.

2. Methodology

The methodology used in this work is based on a qualitative approach, given that the main objective is to understand the experiences, meanings, and perspectives of sign language interpreters in relation to their training and professional practice. This approach allows for exploring the complexity of interpretation, not only from the technical standpoint but also from the subjective, ethical, and existential aspects that shape the interpretive praxis.

Hermeneutic Approach

Hermeneutics is the central approach of this research, as it seeks to interpret and understand the meanings and experiences of sign language interpreters within their cultural, historical, and personal context. Hermeneutics, based on the thought of philosophers such as Heidegger (2018) and Gadamer (2017), allows us to understand how interpreters, as subjects in the world, have a prior understanding of the linguistic and cultural realities that influences their practice.

This approach recognises that interpretation is not a neutral or mechanical act, but is infused with the interpreter's pre-understanding, a set of beliefs, values, and prior experiences that shape their way of acting and understanding the world. The analysis is carried out from a hermeneutic circle, in which the understanding of the whole is built through constant interaction with the parts and vice versa.

Comparative Study: Intergenerational and Intercontinental Approach

A comparative study will be conducted that encompasses the experiences of interpreters from different generations as well as from different geographical contexts. This intergenerational and intercontinental approach will allow for the identification of how training and interpretative practice have evolved over time and in different places. Furthermore, it will allow for the observation of variations in educational approaches and how these affect interpretative practices in different cultures and linguistic contexts.

Reflexivity of the Researcher

Given that the qualitative approach acknowledges the importance of the researcher's subjectivity, a reflexive approach will be adopted throughout the research process. The researcher will reflect on her own influence in the collection and analysis of the data, recognising how her values, beliefs, and personal experiences may impact the interpretation of the results. This critical reflection is crucial to ensure the validity and coherence of the study.

Validation of the Results

To ensure the validity of the obtained results, data triangulation will be employed; that is, the perceptions of the interpreters will be contrasted with existing theories on interpretation and the philosophy of being, and the responses of different groups of interpreters (for example, deaf and hearing) will be compared. In addition, participant validation (also known as 'member checking') will be used, in which interpreters will have the opportunity to review the preliminary interpretations of the data to ensure that their voices are accurately represented.

Ultimately, the qualitative methodology employed in this work allows for a deep and reflective exploration of the interpretation of sign languages, considering not only the technical aspects but also the philosophical, ethical, and existential dimensions that shape the practice. By integrating a hermeneutic approach and a reflective analysis, this methodology provides a comprehensive understanding of the interpretive praxis, focusing on how the being of the interpreter intertwines with the doing in their interpretation process.

3. Analysis

Our reflection starts from a deep analysis of two fundamental concepts in the field of interpretation: professionalism and quality. Both concepts are understood not only from a technical or normative dimension but require a broader exploration that involves introspection (the process of looking inward) and extrospection (the process of looking outward at the environment and external interactions). In interpretation, these two aspects are not isolated compartments; they interrelate and mutually reinforce each other, creating a constant tension that defines professional practice.

Professionalism cannot be limited solely to an accumulation of technical skills. It is more than that: it entails a deep understanding of the interpreter's own being. Who am I as a professional? What values, beliefs, and personal experiences do I bring to the interpreting act? Introspection, in this case, is vital, as it enables

the interpreter to explore their own abilities, their limits, and their relationship with language and others. It is through this internal exercise that the interpreter can achieve greater authenticity and, consequently, a more precise and respectful interpretation. Thus, professionalism is built upon a continuous internal reflection that allows for more informed decisions aligned with ethics and professional responsibility.

On the other hand, the quality of interpretation is closely linked to how the interpreter positions themselves in relation to their environment, which leads us to extrospection. Quality depends not only on the technical ability to translate from one language to another but also on how the interpreter perceives and responds to the needs of the people they interact with. In this sense, extrospection refers to the ability to observe, understand, and adapt to the expectations of the cultural, social, and human context in which the interpretation occurs. The quality of interpretation, therefore, is intrinsically related to the interpreter's capacity to connect, understand, and facilitate understanding between interlocutors, taking into account both verbal and non-verbal aspects.

It is crucial, therefore, that interpreters not only reflect on their inner being (their professionalism) but also on their relationship with the outside world (the quality of their practice). This double reflection, which encompasses both the internal and the external, allows for progress towards an interpretation that is not only technically competent but also ethical and contextualised. Only when these two dimensions, the introspective and the extrospective, are balanced, can the interpreter achieve high levels of professional quality.

Ultimately, this reflective process invites us to recognise that professionalism and quality are not goals to be reached, but continuous processes of construction. These processes are characterised by a constant dialogue between being and doing, between theory and practice, between the internal and the external, which allows us to progress towards a more humane, more precise, and more connected interpretation of the diverse and changing reality we navigate.

What is our theoretical framework?

The concept of 'being' is fundamental to understanding any professional practice, particularly in the field of interpretation. The interpreter must not only master linguistic techniques but also be aware of themselves, their role, and their connection with others. This process of self-knowledge is neither static nor absolute, but dynamic and evolutionary, inherent to the nature of any individual or professional. As Socrates famously emphasised, 'Know thyself.' This maxim invites us not only to gain knowledge but also to embark on a reflective journey that leads us to examine our own existence, values, and beliefs, understanding that true knowledge begins with self-awareness.

From this perspective, being is not a definitive state, but a continuous process. It is not about fixed knowledge, but a process that is constantly constructed through interaction with the environment. According to Socrates, only by understanding ourselves —in our thoughts, emotions, and beliefs— can we begin to understand the impact of our existence on what we do and how we do it. This introspective knowledge is essential for any interpreter, as interpretation is not limited to a technical act of translation between languages, but is an active mediation between human beings with their own internal worlds and perspectives.

Therefore, knowledge in this context does not merely refer to the accumulation of information or

technical skills, but to a continuous process of questioning and self-reflection. It involves challenging our own beliefs and being open to new ways of perceiving the world. This process is vital for the interpreter, as developing a deeper understanding of their own identity makes them more empathetic, flexible, and precise in their work. Furthermore, by becoming aware of how their values and beliefs influence their professional practice, the interpreter becomes an ethical and reflective agent, aware of the contextual implications of their work.

Self-knowledge, therefore, becomes a powerful tool for developing an authentic and effective professional practice. The interpreter is not merely a mechanical translator, but a unique being who brings a personal and singular perspective on reality, reflecting their experiences and emotions in each interpretation. In this sense, interpretation is creation, not just technique. In line with this reflection, the concept of praxis takes on central relevance. Praxis is not an isolated act, but is intimately linked to the contexts in which it takes place. These contexts, both social and cultural and linguistic, depend on both knowledge and the subject's location in the world. Praxis, then, is not simply the application of theory, but a space where action and thought merge, where what we know and what we do mutually enrich each other.

The real challenge lies in understanding that theory and practice are not two separate spheres, but interconnected dimensions that reinforce each other. Theory provides the foundations for praxis, while the latter allows us to verify and refine theory in the real world. However, we must recognise that, although they are deeply intertwined, theory and practice are distinct phenomena, with different functions. In this sense, we can speak of a dualism between the two, as they are necessary and incomplete without the presence of the other. This dialectical relationship is what allows both theoretical and practical knowledge to evolve in a complementary manner.

Thus, both in the field of interpretation and in any other discipline, we must recognise that professionalism is not limited to what we know or what we do, but to how the interaction between these two elements — being and doing— becomes an ongoing process of learning, reflection, and adaptation. The interpretative practice, therefore, is not a mechanical act, but a constant interaction between the interpreter's knowledge and their decisions in the interpretative context.

The practice of interpretation goes beyond being a mere technical act; it involves recognising that the actions of the interpreter are deeply connected to a purpose and an impact on the communication process. Every gesture, every choice, is imbued with significance that is constructed through interaction with others. In this sense, the practice of interpretation reflects the very structure of the interpreter's existence: a continuous process in which being and doing are inextricably intertwined.

The concept of Dasein, as discussed by Heidegger (2018), captures this interrelation through the idea of being inherently situated in and connected to the world. For Heidegger (2018), the human being is not isolated, but is embedded in a world full of things and people that influence and condition our existence. This relationship is always circular, as our understanding of the world is filtered through the pre-understandings we bring from our context.

Interpretative practice is not just the application of rules or the search for exact translations, but a process in which the interpreter constantly confronts their pre-understanding of the world. The interpreter's beliefs, values, and previous experiences regarding language and culture directly influence interpretation. This process is rooted in what Heidegger (2018) refers to as the hermeneutic circle, which asserts that knowledge does not begin from a tabula rasa, but is always conditioned by the prior assumptions that

guide interpretation.

Therefore, interpretative praxis is a dynamic and incomplete process of knowledge. The interpreter, as a being-in-the-world, not only translates words, but also interprets their meaning within a specific context, always influenced by their own being. This process of understanding is never completely closed or present, but is always open to the continuous interpretation of meaning. Interpretation, then, becomes a practice that unravels and reconstructs meanings, which, according to Heidegger (2018), involves an existential, temporal, and everyday structure of consciousness.

Interpretation, as a practice, becomes a space where the being of the interpreter intertwines with the doing. The interpreter's knowledge of themselves, their values, and prejudices influences the way they interpret, while interpretative actions offer a new understanding of linguistic and cultural realities, enriching both the lived experience of the interpreter and that of those receiving the interpretation. Thus, interpretative practice is shaped as a continuous, circular process, where being and doing constantly feed back into each other, reflecting not only technique but also the identity and context of the interpreter within a shared world.

4. Conclusions

In this paper, we have explored the intrinsic relationship between the philosophical concept of "being" and the practice of interpretation, highlighting the importance of self-knowledge and continuous reflection in the professional practice of the interpreter. Through the thoughts of Socrates, Heidegger (2018) , and the interconnection between theory and action, we have demonstrated that interpretation is not limited to a technical act of translation between languages, but is a dynamic, relational, and deeply human process. Interpretation is ultimately an active mediation that requires the interpreter to have a deep understanding of themselves and their role in the world.

Knowledge in interpretation is not merely a matter of accumulating technical skills, but rather the ability to reflect on our being, our beliefs, and emotions, and how these elements shape our practice. As we have argued, the praxis of interpretation is a space where being and doing intertwine, a place where theoretical knowledge and practical actions nourish and enrich each other in their interaction with the context and others.

As interpreters engage in this process of continuous reflection, they open themselves to a more authentic, flexible, and empathetic practice, which enhances the quality of interpretation and facilitates more effective communication. This self-awareness also allows them to be more conscious of the ethical, cultural, and contextual impacts of their work, contributing to a professional practice that goes beyond technique to involve a deep understanding of the contexts in which interpretation takes place.

In conclusion, interpretation, understood as praxis, is not simply an isolated technique, but rather an action that reflects a unique and personal worldview. The interpreter is, in this sense, a being-in-the-world, whose values and experiences shape both their way of interpreting and how they interact with others. This continuous process of being and doing reveals that theory and practice are not separate dimensions, but rather feed into and evolve together, allowing interpretation to be a field of constant learning and adaptation.

The challenge for future interpreters and professional training programs lies in fostering a reflective practice that not only encompasses technical skills but also promotes a deep reflection on the essence of the interpreter. Only in this way can we ensure an interpretation that is, at the same time, technical, ethical, and profoundly human, capable of transcending linguistic and cultural barriers towards true understanding.

5.   References

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Professionalism and quality: Two currents of the same river

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Qualified: What next?

Proceedings of the 2024 efsli conference
Turin, Italy

(From 'safe to practise', to 'striving for excellence')

This volume collects the papers and abstracts from the EFSLI Conference 2024 in Turin, exploring the evolving profession of signed language inter–preters and translators in Europe. It examines how the field has changed, the career paths available after qualification, and how practitioners move from being 'safe to practise' to achieving professional excellence.

Contributors address key themes including professional development, quality of interpretation and translation, career trajectories, service users' perspectives, collaboration, and the sustainability and wellbeing of the profession. This collection offers valuable insights for researchers, practitioners, and anyone interested in the advancement of signed language interpreting and translation.