Quality assurance in international sign conference interpreting at international organisations

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Abstract: Quality assurance (QA) in conference interpreting is considered essential among international organisations[1] and interpreting practitioners (Pöchhacker, 1994). The need for QA resulted in the establishment of the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC) and the development of university degree programmes in conference interpreting in spoken languages worldwide (Seeber, 2021). International organisations such as the United Nations and the European Union (EU) work closely with universities worldwide to ensure that interpreters are trained and assessed in line with their requirements. Sign language conference interpreters working with International Sign (IS) do not have equivalent opportunities to be trained and assessed as their spoken language colleagues, with whom they work for international organisations. Therefore, to assure that those who deliver IS conference interpretation services are up to quality standards, the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) and the World Association of Sign Language Interpreters (WASLI) established an accreditation system for IS interpreters in 2015. As of June 2021, thirty IS interpreters had obtained the corresponding accreditation. In this article we examine the 2021 QA system for IS conference interpreters and present findings from our 2019 global survey of the perspectives of IS conference interpreters (de Wit et al., 2021) in combination with a follow-up study on practitioners' training and accreditation needs. The results indicate that there is a demand for formal professional training programmes that focus on interpreting IS in conference settings and a need to enhance the current accreditation system.

Keywords: Quality assurance; conference interpreting; International Sign; interpreter education.

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[1] Scholarly literature lacks a widely accepted definition of international institutions and organisations (Duffield, 2007). Following the majority of the literature in translation and interpreting, in this article we use the term 'international organisations' to mean those organisations such as the United Nations and the European Union.

1. Introduction

In becoming conference interpreters, sign language interpreters working with International Sign (IS) follow a learning route very different from spoken language interpreters and even national sign language interpreters (Napier, 2015; Turner et al., 2021; de Wit, 2020b). IS is a translingual practice (Kusters, 2020) that is often the default mode of communication, or lingua franca, used at international deaf events such as the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) Congress (Green, 2014; WFD, 2019; Kusters, 2021) and offered by international organisations as part of their language interpretation service to cater to an international deaf audience (European Commission Dep. for Interpretation (SCIC), 2021; United Nations Geneva, 2020). In contrast to the specialist academic training of spoken language conference interpreters, conference IS interpreters mostly learn IS informally through interactions with deaf signers and other interpreters and acquire IS conference interpreting skills by observing other IS interpreters and deaf signers (de Wit, et al., 2021).

Conference interpreters are expected to deliver a high-quality simultaneous interpretation at complex high-level events (Gile, 2006). Quality assurance (QA) in conference interpretation therefore requires standards, training and assessments. The International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC) has developed professional standards to ensure quality in conference interpreting (AIIC, 2016), which apply to spoken and signed language interpreters (de Wit, 2020b). Academic training of conference interpreters is one of the foundations to assure quality (Gile, 2009; Seeber, 2021; Setton & Dawrant, 2016). Assessment of spoken language conference interpreters is conducted as part of their academic training (Sawyer, 2004) and international organisations demand that all spoken language interpreters pass their in-house interpreting exams.

Although IS conference interpreters work at these organisations in the same settings, such training programmes and assessments are not available to them. There is no literature on quality assurance (QA) in conference IS interpreting other than that a lack of training has been noted as a concern (Leeson, 2005).

This study sought to examine current practices in QA of IS conference interpreting and their implications. In this article we explore QA in conference interpreting and give an overview of current practices (June 2021) in IS conference interpreter training, recruitment and assessment, before presenting the corresponding views of accredited and aspiring IS conference interpreters and making suggestions on how to ensure QA in IS conference interpreting.

2. Quality assurance in conference interpreting

Interpreters and users of conference interpreting require the delivery and receipt of interpretations that meet relevant quality criteria. However, the objective assessment of interpretation quality is difficult (Becerra & Aís, 2019; Kalina, 2005). Although it is suggested that interpretation quality depends on the context of the interpreting assignment (Diriker, 2021; Kalina, 2005; Pöchhacker, 1994; Zwischenberger, 2011) there is no common agreement among practitioners on how to define quality (Kahane, 2000; Shlesinger, 1997).

Perspectives on interpretation quality differs among various stakeholders (see for example Chiaro & Nocella, 2004; Kurz, 2001; Vuorikoski, 1995). Limited research on the perspectives of deaf persons on conference sign language interpreting quality has been carried out (e.g. Haug et al., 2017; Kurz

& Hill, 2018; de Wit & Sluis, 2014), but in this article we focus on practitioners' views.

An essential component of QA is training, which serves as a foundation to acquire conference interpreting skills (Gile, 2005, 2009; Setton & Dawrant, 2016). In addition, interpreting graduates need to build their competence for working in international organisations through situated learning in order to become fully competent practitioners (Chouc & Conde, 2016; Duflou, 2016; González-Davies & Enríquez-Raído, 2016). This can be achieved, for example, through mentoring (Duflou, 2016), in-house training (Varela Garcia, 2021), blended learning (Rodríguez Melchor, 2018) or self-directed learning (Zhong, 2008).

Assessing the quality of the interpretation as an end product is part of assuring that the interpretation meets the criteria (Pöchhacker, 1994). QA of interpretation requires assessment and reliable assessment, in turn, requires explicit reference to assessment criteria and standards, ensuring the training of assessors and enhancing the in-depth assessment with a portfolio (Sawyer, 2004). Transparent and consistent assessment can be achieved through use of a structured rubric that delineates demonstration of different levels of performance for the skills and competencies required (Chan & Ho, 2019; Wang et al., 2015), which helps candidates support and self-assess their performance (Jonsson, 2014).

Accuracy, consistency and conformity to institutional conventions are the most essential features in distinguishing a quality interpretation and international organizations that have no in-house evaluation procedures for freelance interpreters should work with available interpreter evaluation tools for users in other domains (Prieto Ramos, 2020). Additionally, an important QA tool is the new ISO standard on conference interpreting services, DIS 23155 (ISO, 2021).

In the following sections we give an overview of the current practices in training, assessment and recruitment of conference interpreters.

3. Assessment, recruitment and training of conference interpreters

Conference interpreters work at high-level multilingual events for international organisations or on the private market (Russo & Alonso-Araguás, 2017). This article focuses on interpreters at international organisations, such as the EU (with twenty-four official spoken languages) and the UN (with six official spoken languages), who are seen as global leaders in providing conference interpretation services (Seeber, 2021). National sign languages (NSLs) or IS are not regarded as an official language in any international organisations, but sign language interpretation is provided upon request for public events. Spoken language interpreters, staff and freelancers are recruited through an established selection procedure. One of the selection criteria is that the interpreter must have a master's degree in conference interpreting. AIIC set quality criteria for the training of conference interpreters worldwide and lists seventy programmes in their Directory that meet their criteria (AIIC, 2019).

Spoken language interpreters wanting to work for an international institution must pass an institutional interpreter entry exam. The EU has a single inter-institutional test whose low pass rate[2] indicates that it is not a mere

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[2] Personal communication G. Borkowksa, EC Test Office, 19 July 2021: EU accreditation tests are organized in cycles that match academic years. For the last test cycle 2019/2020 (prolonged until June 2021 due to Covid-19 related reasons) 1036

formality for graduates from conference interpreting programmes (Duflou, 2016). At the UN, eligible candidates, after passing a pre-selection exam, can take the interpreter accreditation exam, including a career-specific skills test and competency-based interview (United Nations, 2021). There are no numbers available on the overall pass rate at the UN, but in 2020 for example, only six out of sixty-two eligible candidates passed the French language accreditation (personal communication, R. Edgington, UNOG, 29 June 2021). At present, similar accreditation tests are not available for sign language interpreters.

In order to resolve the shortage of qualified conference interpreters in the EU, especially in rare languages, the European Masters in Conference Interpreting (EMCI) consortium, a model core curriculum for training conference interpreters, was officially established in 2012 (European Masters in Conference Interpreting (EMCI), 2021). The KU Leuven university is the only EMCI member which allows students to choose a sign language (Flemish Sign Language) as one of their working languages.

AIIC holds the only global reference list of qualified conference interpreters, listing more than 3000 members, including forty sign language interpreters. In 2018 the WFD, World Association of Sign Language Interpreters (WASLI) and the Sign Language Linguistics Society (SLLS) asked AIIC not to list IS as a possible working language as this might imply IS is a language and the organisations might then not provide interpretation into NSLs. Therefore, AIIC has paused the listing of IS.[3] As a result, to become an AIIC member, a sign language interpreter currently must apply with their NSL credentials. Before becoming an AIIC member, an interpreter is first a candidate, which allows less experienced interpreters to gain more experience while having access to the AIIC membership benefits and network.

IS interpreters continue to be in high demand at international organisations (SCIC, 2021; de Wit et al., 2021; de Wit & Sluis, 2016). There is limited data available on the number of days IS conference interpreters are recruited by international organisations. The EU witnessed a significant increase in the provision of IS interpretations from 2019 to 2020[4] as the EU Commission's weekly press conferences and informational videos were all interpreted into IS during the Covid-19 pandemic (European Commission Dep. for Interpretation, 2021). The UN Geneva has also reported a significant increase of sign language interpretation provision, with more than half of the requests being for IS interpretation.[5] Although the number of sign language interpreting requests in general decreased during 2020-2021 due to the Covid-19 pandemic (Meulder et al., 2021), conference IS interpreters did work from remote locations. They connected through a range of online platforms, requiring additional flexibility,

applications were screened and out of 189 candidates tested, 51 were successful, a pass rate of 27%. For the previous test year 2018/2019, the figures were as follows: pass rate 30%, 587 applications screened, out of 163 candidates tested in accreditation test, 49 were successful.

[3] Personal correspondence letter from AIIC President to WASLI, WFD and SLLS presidents, 14 January 2019.

[4] In 2019 a total of 29 meeting days with sign language interpretation and 55 in 2020.

[5] 2017 UNOG annual report: 247 working days of sign language interpretation, including 123 days IS (United Nations Geneva, 2017). The 2018 UNOG report: 208 days, including 132 with IS (United Nations Geneva, 2018). In 2019 IS interpretation in 90 meetings. In 2020 due to Covid-19 restrictions UNOG held far fewer meetings overall, 11 had IS interpretation with interpreters working in extremis from home. In 2021 UNOG expects a total of 55 meetings with sign language interpretation by the end of 2021 (personal communication R. Edgington, UNOG, 7 September 2021).

skills and investment of the interpreters and conference management services at international organisations (de Wit, Tester, et al., 2021).

The training of sign language interpreters varies across the world (Napier, 2009). In the Global North, they typically complete an undergraduate degree programme for sign language interpreting (de Wit, 2020a). These programmes do not educate students to become conference interpreters. Students are trained as generalists in community interpreting and after graduation can become specialists through self-study and accumulative experience, or by taking a conference interpreting module in a postgraduate degree. As concluded in our earlier study (de Wit et al., 2021), IS conference interpreters lack training in conference settings and mostly acquire the required skills through practice. Other than short courses or workshops, there are few opportunities to learn IS interpreting through structured learning.

To mitigate the shortage of IS interpreters, in 2020 SCIC[6] began a collaboration with the European Union of the Deaf (EUD) and the European Union of the Deaf Youth (EUDY) for a four-week mentoring programme for IS interpreters. Interpreters who met certain criteria[7] could apply. Four sign language interpreters with varying experiences and language profiles were selected. The mentees observed EU-specific meeting procedures, learned about the EU institutions, mastered the use of terminology databases and meeting resources and received daily feedback on interpreting practice in real EU events.

SCIC also co-funded the development of a pilot intensive course offered by Heriot-Watt University on IS interpreting in international conferences and high-level meetings, which was designed in collaboration with multiple stakeholders, representatives of international deaf and interpreter associations as well as international organisation. The course targeted unaccredited interpreters who had some competence in IS plus conference interpreting experience in their NSL. The goal was to evaluate readiness to apply for IS interpreter accreditation and to pilot curriculum content for a potential master's programme. The one-off course, which ran online during June 2021, for twenty interpreters, focused on strengthening IS skills, enhancing awareness of relevant European and international organisations, as well as practical translingual interpreting skills mostly between English and IS.

4.   Accreditation of IS interpreters

The accreditation tests for interpreters at international organisations, such as the UN (UNOG, 2021) and the EU (European Union, 2021), are designed for spoken language interpreters and differ per institution. The absence of accreditation options for sign language interpreters meant there was no QA for IS conference interpreters. To resolve this situation, the WFD and WASLI

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[6] Directorate General of Interpretation

[7] Have an excellent command of a national sign language over a wide range of topics and registers; Have an excellent command of spoken English and/or French over a wide range of topics and registers (minimum C2 level); Have conversational fluency in International Sign; Have a national sign language interpreting qualification (or equivalent, such as proven experience); Have a minimum of 3 years' experience in national sign language interpreting, including at least 10 days experience in sign language conference interpreting; Be able to provide a reference letter from either the respective national association of the deaf or recognised interpreting association; Have a professional domicile in the EU/EEA.

jointly created an accreditation system for IS conference interpreters, specifically geared towards the UN. WFD-WASLI actively encourage the UN to recruit only accredited IS conference interpreters. In 2015 a group of twenty interpreters already known to WFD-WASLI were accredited based on a work portfolio and reference letters. As of June 2021, the list had expanded to thirty accredited interpreters – see Table 1 (WFD & WASLI, 2019).

Table 1: Demographic profile of 30 WFD-WASLI accredited IS interpreters (June 2021)

Variable	N	%	Deaf	Hearing	Female	Male
Female	11	36.7	3	8		
Male	19	63.3	12	7		
Deaf	15	50				
Hearing	15	50				
Based in:						
Europe	21	70	10	11	8	13
North America	5	16.7	3	2	1	4
Australia/Oceania	3	10	1	2	2	1
Asia	0	0	0	0	0	0
Africa	0	0	0	0	0	0
South & Central America	1	3.3	1	0	0	1
Availability:						
Regularly	20	66.6	10	10	7	13
Occasionally	7	23.3	4	3	2	5
Unavailable	1	3.3	0	1	0	1
Unspecified	2	6.6	1	1	2	0

Since 2015, applicants must meet additional requirements. They must provide samples of IS interpreting work and take a live remote interpreting test. The members of the IS Accreditation Advisory Board (ISAAB), responsible for reviewing the applications, consists of individuals approved by boards of WFD and WASLI. Criteria on how to become a committee member are available, but it is not publicly advertised who the committee members are. The individuals represent WASLI, WFD, and include a spoken language interpreter educator, WFD-WASLI accredited hearing and deaf interpreters and a WFD staff member.

Since the first accreditation procedure, additional procedures have been published, including a Code of Conduct (2018) for accredited interpreters and a Professional Conduct Review Process (2019). With these procedures, WFD-WASLI provide a mechanism for any person to make a complaint about an accredited interpreter's conduct.

Although many steps have been taken to set standards in IS interpreting, the WFD-WASLI IS interpreter accreditation process faces criticism by members of deaf and interpreting communities. This became apparent at the 2019 WASLI conference during a panel discussion on the accreditation test. Members of international interpreting and deaf communities expressed their concern about the absence of diversity among accredited interpreters with respect to deaf/hearing representation, gender and region, possible false passes in the accreditation procedure and the lack of clarity of IS interpreters' accreditation in NSLs.

The current QA system for IS conference interpreters, WFD-WASLI accreditation, differs from that of spoken language conference interpreters working for international organisations. As the accreditation system is relatively new and there is not yet any formal training in place for IS conference

interpreters, this study sought to collect the views of current practitioners to inform recommendations for training and accreditation to further the QA of IS conference interpreting.

5. Positionality

We, the authors of this paper, all identify with numerous roles and functions as members of international signing deaf and interpreting communities. Our study was carried out using a reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which is conceptualized as a situated and interactive process, by reflecting on the data, the context of the research itself and the positionality of the researcher(s). Therefore, before presenting the study, we briefly frame our positions related to interpreting research (as recommended by Bendazzoli & Monacelli, 2016).

During the last twenty-five years, the three of us have been actively involved in national and global deaf communities and the development of the sign language interpreter profession on different levels through research, training and consultancy. Maya conducted this study as part of her PhD candidature, she has led on the research design, data collection and analysis. Maya was raised bilingually with spoken languages (German and Dutch) and is a certified sign language interpreter in American Sign Language (ASL) and Dutch Sign Language[8] (NGT). Onno is the primary supervisor and a professor of NGT, trained as a NGT interpreter, and is a member of the WFD Sign Language and Deaf Studies Expert Group. Jemina is the second supervisor and a heritage signer[9]; her home language was British Sign Language (BSL). Jemina is also competent in ASL and is professionally qualified to interpret between English and BSL and Australian Sign Language (Auslan). Maya and Jemina were both involved in the design of the WFD-WASLI IS interpreter accreditation system and are accredited IS interpreters.

Drawing on Tiselius (2018), we would like to note that this research has an emic approach: we would not have been able to carry out this research without the support of colleagues and international deaf and interpreting communities.

6. Method

In our study we used mixed methods (Hale & Napier, 2013). In 2019, we conducted a global online survey of ninety conference interpreters who work with IS. The survey questions were based on a literature review and observations of interpreting practices. We mapped the profile of IS conference interpreters, including documenting language combinations, training and work settings (de Wit et al., 2021). For the purpose of a sequential study, survey respondents were asked if they were also willing to participate in an individual follow-up interview. This article focuses on the results of these interviews, specifically on the topics of accreditation and training of IS conference interpreters.

Eleven conference IS interpreters were purposively sampled for interviews to ensure a diverse representation of practitioners, as shown in Table 2 (as the

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[8] Also referred to as Sign Language of the Netherlands.
[9] Grew up using a signed language at home with deaf parents (Napier, 2021).

community is small and individuals are easily identifiable, no specific characteristics are given in the table to protect their identities).

Table 2: Participant demographics

Variable	N
Interviews	11
Gender	
Female	8
Male	3
Accredited / non-accredited	
Accredited	6
Non-accredited	5
Auditory status	
Deaf	4
Hearing	7
Continents	
Europe	6
N-America	2
Africa	1
Asia	1
Oceania	1

The interviews took place from July to November 2019: eight interviews on site at events where both the interviewee and interviewer were attending, and three via video call. Interviews were conducted by the first author in the participant's preferred language: six in IS, five in spoken English. The interview questions were drawn from salient survey responses and relevant literature on accreditation and training (Appendix 1). All interviews were recorded, resulting in 7.5 hours of recordings, with an average of 39 minutes per interview. The recordings were transcribed/translated in English using ELAN software (*ELAN (Version 6.0)*, 2020). The videos with the English transcription were sent to the participants for review and approval. Each interview was summarised in English and related themes on accreditation and training were highlighted. These themes were the starting point for the annotation of each interview in ELAN. The first author carried out a reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of the interview data, familiarizing herself with the data, identifying and fine-tuning the themes across all interviews in an iterative process. The authors chose reflexive thematic analysis as it gives access to people's thinking, acknowledges the researchers' own positions in their community that they study, and allows for reflections on experiences. This process resulted in two lists of generated themes and subthemes related to accreditation and training (Appendix 2).

7. Results

In order to contextualise the qualitative results from the interviews, we first give a brief overview of some of the quantitative survey results, including answers to open ended questions and comments. The online survey collected comprehensive data of IS interpreters worldwide (see de Wit et al. (2021) for demographic results). Here we present the 2019 survey results specifically on accreditation, which have not been previously published, followed by relevant extracts from the interviews.

7.1. Survey

Of the ninety conference IS interpreter survey respondents, twenty-six (28.9%) were accredited by WFD-WASLI at the time the survey was administered. Figure 1 shows the responses of those that are not accredited and whether they had applied for accreditation (n=63). Reasons for not applying were mostly related to respondents feeling they did not have the necessary skills or the opportunity to obtain those skills. Such lack of opportunity is often due to the long distance to events with IS or limited financial means to fund travel and the accreditation test and registration.
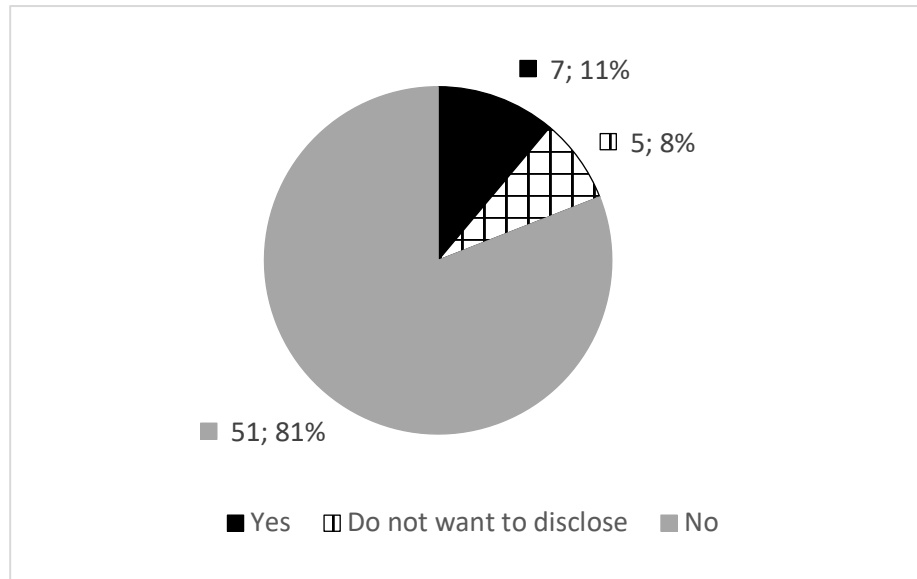

Figure 1: Current conference IS interpreters and if they applied to WFD-WASLI for accreditation (n=63)

The interpreters who had not applied were asked if they were considering applying in the future. The respondents that wanted to apply state that it was important to take the test in recognition of their skills and to meet an internationally recognised standard, mentioning that it would move their career forward. Almost half of the respondents were not sure whether to apply, mentioning reasons such as: wanting to complete an interpreting degree first; that they were uncertain where their career is going; and that they needed to gain more IS interpreting experience. Those that did not intend to apply mentioned several reasons, mostly related to a lack of opportunity to gain experience. They typically felt that they were not able to put in enough hours because of their geographical location.
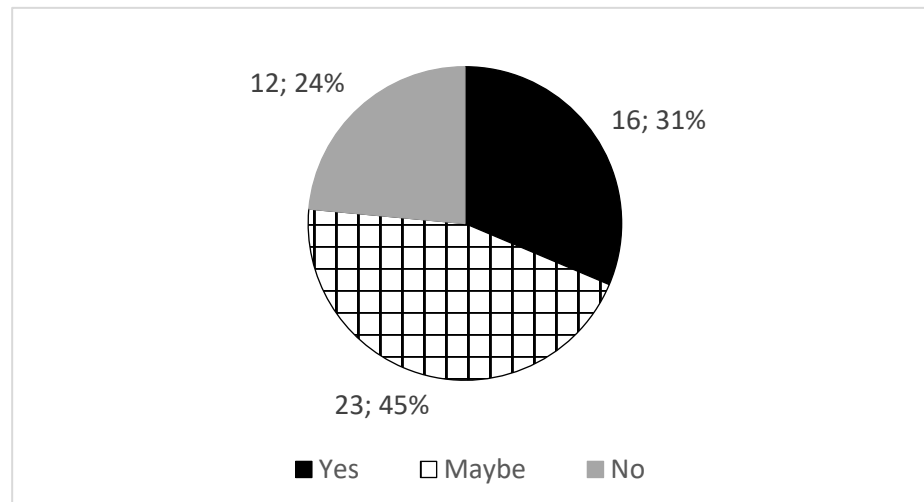
Figure 2: Non-accredited IS conference interpreters and if they plan to apply to the WFD-WASLI accreditation (n=51)

7.1. Interviews

We now present the analysis of the interviews on the themes of accreditation and training (Appendix 2). On accreditation we determined four broad themes: (1) awareness of the IS interpreter accreditation, (2) the pool of IS interpreters, (3) the accreditation process and (4) the accreditation system. On training we have five broad themes: (i) learning IS, (ii) experiencing IS and IS interpreting, (iii) requirements for interpreters to train as an IS interpreter, (iv) the structure of the training and (v) the content of the training. The themes are illustrated with quotes from the interviews, which are anonymized to avoid any unintentional identification of participants. However, when a quote explicitly mentions deaf or hearing interpreters, the text indicates whether the interviewee is deaf or hearing. Overall, the individual interviews complement each other and show no strong disagreement but similar thinking among the interviewees.

7.1.1. Accreditation
7.1.1.1. Awareness of IS interpreter accreditation

The interviewees stress the importance of an accreditation system for IS conference interpreters. They mention that it is necessary to set international standards in order to serve international deaf communities and organisations at a high level. Before the accreditation system was in place, deaf people and international organisations did not always know who was qualified to provide adequate IS interpretation services. With the current system it is clear who can provide quality IS interpretation:

> Now there's a structure in terms of an accreditation piece. Prior to that I do think it was the Wild West. (…) deaf representatives were coming to Geneva and the UN were booking random interpreters who couldn't interpret for these people.

Concerns were also raised about the WFD-WASLI accreditation system. Interviewees question for whom the accreditation system is intended and for which settings. For example, they mention that national deaf organisations assume they would need to hire a WFD-WASLI accredited IS interpreter for any international event. The interviewees note that in their view the accreditation system is specifically designed to verify the skill needed for international high-level (political) conference events and not for more informal

events such as deaf sports events or festivals. They find this practice unfortunate because having a single type of accreditation creates the illusion that for any assignment requiring IS, accredited IS interpreters are needed. The interviewees suggest that the messaging should be improved to raise the awareness of the purpose of the accreditation system.

To further the recruitment of IS interpreters, the interviewees propose that the WFD-WASLI accreditation system should be aligned with current global spoken language conference interpreter standards and systems. This would allow for better understanding and ease of recruitment by those in need of IS conference interpreting services:

> We want to be recognized on par with spoken language interpreters, you know follow the AIIC model. We need to take that into consideration because I'm not only going in one direction from spoken language into sign language.

7.1.1.2. Pool of IS interpreters

To meet the high demand for IS interpreters, the interviewees see the need to increase the pool of accredited interpreters. They also emphasize the need for more regional representation on the IS interpreters' accreditation panel and on the accredited list: "Regional deaf communities should have accredited IS interpreters that match the diverse regional linguistic and cultural needs."

The interviewees further suggest that the accreditation system introduce levels or categories of proficiency similar to AIIC. This would bridge the current gap that many non-accredited interpreters experience working to become an IS interpreter. The inexperienced IS interpreters can be added to a team of experienced IS interpreters who act as mentors during actual assignments:

> If you have a team of three interpreters ideally two of them would be from the list and you would have a third person. That enables us to be very flexible bringing in capacity.

The current accreditation is limited to IS and English and the interviewees view the language of the current accreditees as too Anglocentric, and the need for further global representation. They suggest adding additional languages, such as Spanish and French, or any other of the six UN languages which would benefit the language regime in the international organisations. They also suggest that knowing additional NSLs, other than ASL, BSL or Auslan, would be of benefit: "There are only a few international sign interpreters that know other European signed languages."

In addition, the interviewees mention that there are interpreters who are skilled at working from IS into a spoken language, so they should be able to get accreditation in that direction only, with IS being passive and the spoken language as an active language: "The accreditation system should bring out the wealth of linguistic resources that each interpreter has."

The interviewees note that the accredited interpreters have a strong connection with international deaf communities, which they see as a prerequisite for accreditation. However, they also mention that the accreditation system unintentionally creates a divide between those who are accredited and those who are not. Several interviewees say that accredited interpreters are seen as an elite, occupying the highest rank one can reach in sign language interpreting. As a result, being on the accredited list becomes an aspiration for some of those who are not accredited. Yet, while all interviewees work as conference IS interpreters, not all are aware of the existence of the WFD-

WASLI accreditation. Those that were previously unaware state that they will now do everything possible to become an accredited IS interpreter:

> In an interpreting profession knowing IS is like the peak of the profession. So it's like because very few people know IS it seems like it's an elite group of people. And so... for you know speaking for myself as an interpreter I would consider it this an ultimate goal to become an [accredited] IS interpreter.

7.1.1.3. Accreditation process

The interviewees think that the accreditation procedure should be reviewed. They underline that a candidate should be an experienced NSL interpreter with an interpreting degree before applying to WFD-WASLI for accreditation. What they currently miss is a clear outline of the assessment criteria. They advocate that following the assessment, the assessors should provide detailed feedback so the applicant is aware of any skills gaps to address. They would like transparency of who is on the accreditation board, which in turn might boost integrity of the board:

> It all depends on who's who and who has the political power to make the policy decision and who signs on the dotted lines. If you have a person that's representing African interest, they're going to push for that.

The interviewees suggest that having a definition of IS would help them understand what is exactly being accredited. When asked, to define what IS is the interviewees describe IS as a framework with a limited conventionalized vocabulary, in which the sign language grammar creates the structure that carries the meaning, and where the interpreter continuously strategizes to create visual concepts which are understandable to a linguistically broad audience. They emphasize that there are many variations in IS, and that further research and discussions between stakeholders are needed to gain a better understanding of what IS is:

> There's IS that happens at community level. That is not conference level, but is definitely IS. So what do you call that? So that's a whole other conversation. And, you know, is that the remit of WASLI or WFD to do that?

Working towards accreditation is the sole responsibility of the applicant interpreter, who needs to be proactive, according to the interviewees. Some accredited interpreters express their concerns about gatekeeping powers of their colleagues, who may not support less experienced interpreters. The non-accredited respondents also mention several obstacles leading up to accreditation, such as the lack of practice opportunities. They advocate the sharing of best practices, as well as a programme that combines training and mentoring. Additionally, the interviewees mention the great responsibility that comes with being accredited, such as adhering to professional standards and the WFD-WASLI Code of Conduct:

> If my name is on the WFD list I have an even greater responsibility. That means I need to be a professional, do a good job, continue to improve myself by further studying. If I do not do a good job, I must own up to that responsibility.

7.1.1.4. Accreditation system

The interviewees applaud that there is an accreditation system for IS interpreters in place and say that its establishment has changed IS interpreting over time. They also note the disadvantages of having such a system, for example, for

those who do not have the means or the opportunity to get accredited. WASLI-WFD encourage interpreters to become accredited as the intention is that those who are accredited IS interpreters, are hired by international organisations and by deaf and sign language interpreter organisations. However, the deaf IS accredited interpreter interviewees are dissatisfied with the lack of recruitment of deaf interpreters by most of the international organisations, including WFD and EUD. When they are hired, they feel it is for tokenistic purposes:

> Maybe this is because they trust hearing interpreters more or they feel better about them, I don't know. But when they host the [WFD] world congress then they must have deaf interpreters to see a deaf face there as an interpreter, which then looks good.

Similar to other established interpreter accreditation procedures, the aim of WFD-WASLI is to accredit interpreters in the languages they work with, in this case IS. The interviewees discuss the political tension that comes with the use of IS and providing interpretation into IS. WFD-WASLI emphasize that IS is not a language, yet they have an accreditation system for IS interpreters, which does seem to qualify IS as a language. The interviewees flag that WFD-WASLI's stance on the recognition of IS does not help to clarify its status:

> And I think that the WFD, instead of being scared of International Sign, saying it's not a language and deprecating it whilst using it and trying to have it [at the same time]. And, you know, I mean, it's like they present a contradiction. And I think that instead of being scared of IS damaging their natural indigenous sign languages, I think that they need to develop a way to argue why they need to keep their own sign language and explain to ignoramuses the phenomenon of International Sign.

In summary, the interviewees see the WFD-WASLI accreditation system as essential in ensuring quality IS interpretation services. However, they also see the need for a transparent accreditation process that matches the criteria of international organisations. With this comes the need for learning opportunities and continuous development, not only to become an IS interpreter, but also for accredited interpreters: "I think the best interpreters will survive and continue to grow and develop and still be wanted in primary assignments."

7.1.2. Training
7.1.2.1. Learning IS and IS interpreting
Practitioners stress that IS cannot be learned in the classroom. To learn IS, they typically attend international events and engage in online learning. Those who are not based in Europe find learning through self-study challenging as there is no standard curriculum and resources are not easily shared among IS conference interpreters: "But I'm also hoping that there could be more collaboration, more sharing of resources and information within that community."

The interviewees learned interpreting IS through volunteering or on the job. They see a big gap between being an experienced NSL interpreter and becoming an accredited IS conference interpreter. The interviewees also stress the importance of learning and working in mixed teams of deaf and hearing interpreters. As one deaf interviewee said: "For me it is important not to separate the deaf and hearing interpreters, [as] we have a common goal to get to."

The interviewees state that IS conference interpreters should have at least completed a NSL interpreter training programme, preferably at a university level. In addition to their interpreting skills the interpreters need an academic

level of thinking and well-developed general knowledge to interpret at high-level international conferences. Although the interviewees acknowledge that deaf interpreters are not always able to participate in a NSL interpreter programme, they still stress that it should be a minimum requirement:

> I do not think it would be ethically correct knowing that deaf people undertake a four-year education, get a degree and I as a [deaf] interpreter would surpass that without an interpreter education.

7.1.2.2. The structure of the training

To deliver competent IS conference interpreters, the interviewees suggest that interpreters need specific training that should be twofold. First, the candidate should work towards becoming an IS conference interpreter through informal learning and self-study. This informal learning should focus on gaining fluency in IS and familiarisation with variations in IS in different contexts, for instance, through interacting with deaf signers at international events and experiencing communication in IS. Most of all, prospective IS interpreters can learn a lot by observing IS interpreters:

> These endless observations helped me create my understanding. Going to all these places and seeing how the interpreter worked differently and what worked well, it really helped a lot.

Second, formal training in combination with a mentoring programme should be offered so that candidates are guided by experienced practitioners. Such formal training should focus on key IS conference interpreting requirements, such as professional standards, IS interpretation strategies and working in a mixed team of deaf and hearing interpreters:

> I'm seeing an increase in demand for IS interpreters especially because deaf people are more and more getting involved in the global scenario. So definitely there would be more need for IS interpreters. And so I'm really hoping that you know, in terms of trainings and education for IS it could be more formalized.

Both accredited and non-accredited interviewees agree that there is a lack of peer guidance that would familiarize them with the professional practices of IS conference interpreting:

> I have to work and learn on the job at the same time. And I do not really have feedback from deaf colleagues. I need to learn myself, and I find that unfortunate. I must take it on to self-assess, to push myself to move on, and constantly facing barriers, and again self-assess and move on. So really it is quite a process.

7.1.2.3. Content of the training

According to the interviewees, the content of formal training in IS conference interpreting should cover theory and practice of sign languages and interpreting (see Table 3 and a detailed list in Appendix 2). Although the interviewees are not experts on training or curriculum design, their experiences can inform the future training of IS interpreters. They also mention that formal training pre-assessment would help determine the skill level of the candidate interpreter. This could be used as a benchmark to set an entry level for candidates, as well as to guide the learning process and ensure the content meets the learning needs.

Table 3: Suggested minimum components of an IS conference interpreter training programme

THEORY		
Sign languages	**Interpreting**	
Sign language linguistics & deaf cultures	Protocols in conference interpreting	Ethics and self-assessment
Grammar in sign languages (as a carrier of meaning)	Preparation tools and strategies	Interpreting to and from English
Cross-cultural mediation and multi-cultural awareness	Interpreting strategies: message analysis and collecting IS synonyms	Building knowledge on different topics and organisations
IS variations and IS vocabulary		
PRACTICE		
Sign languages	**Interpreting**	
Taster in different NSLs	Interpreting to and from English	Interpreting for a broad audience	Team interpreting and taking/giving relay
Increasing language and IS competency	Interpreting IS < > NSL	Adapting to linguistic variations and cultural contexts	Disconnecting from the English source
Creating visual images and concepts and creativity with sign languages	Interpreting live English captions > IS (for deaf interpreter)	Using all resources in the room	Increasing processing time

The fact that the default language of current IS conference interpreting practices is English also creates a barrier in the language of training as teaching and mentoring tends to be limited to the use of English or IS. As a result, it will be difficult to expand the pool of IS interpreters in regions where English is not frequently used.

Yet the interviewees emphasize the importance of IS conference interpreters having English language competency. Not only is English most frequently used in high level conference settings where IS interpreters are needed, there is also the use of English by IS signers:

> And this really also links to the situation, so at the UN and the EU this also means English. In other situations, English is less important, but at the UN and the parliament [assembly] it is. I think to know English is important. For example, knowing written English. Especially as there are many English mouthings in IS.

At the same time, the interviewees stress that the IS conference interpreter needs to be able to detach from the English source when creating an interpretation into IS: "When working from English to IS, it is easier to fall back on common signs. There is a tighter and closer connection to signs in IS and English."

The interviewees mention that the essence of interpreting into IS is using different resources, such as visual concepts and lexicon from various sign languages and how they are expressed. The most important aspect of learning how to create an IS interpretation is the interaction with deaf signers and observing of IS interpreters. Interviewees describe this as a continuous process that shapes their learning and expands their IS repertoire:

I think one component that would develop the IS skills is observing deaf performers and artists. Like how they express themselves, like VV [Visual Vernacular], like having a strong visual component.

In summary, the interviewees find that due to a lack of training similar to that of spoken language interpreters, IS conference interpreters find it hard to obtain all the competencies needed to deliver a high-quality interpretation.

8. Discussion and conclusion

This study shows that the quality assurance (QA) system for IS conference interpreters differs from that of spoken language conference interpreters. Yet international organisations recruit interpreters from both groups to work in a mixed team. Current practices indicate there is a gap between the training of spoken language conference interpreters and their institutional interpreting exam pass rates (Chouc & Conde, 2016; Duflou, 2016; European Commission Dep. for Interpretation, 2019; United Nations Department for General Assembly and Conference Management, 2019). In other words, many interpreters who complete the conference interpreter training programmes find it challenging to meet the formal requirements of international organizations. IS conference interpreters, who should meet the same standards as their spoken language colleagues, do not have the same learning opportunities as spoken language interpreters because conference interpreting training programmes are not made available to them, and thus they feel even less prepared to deliver high-level interpreting services.

In addition, contrary to spoken language interpreters, IS conference interpreters at international organisations have not been required to pass the in-house exam, so the QA between spoken and signed language interpreters is inconsistent. The only QA available to international organisations is the WFD-WASLI list of accredited IS interpreters. Yet the quality criteria used in the WFD-WASLI assessment are different from the international organisations' own exams.

Our study was informed by practitioners, accredited and aspiring IS conference interpreters, and their experiences and perspectives on accreditation and training. Even though these individual reflections represent only a small sample, the results provide initial insights that can help us to consider how to improve the QA of IS conference interpreters.

The interviewees confirm earlier findings in the literature on spoken language interpreters (Gile, 2005; Setton & Dawrant, 2016): an interpreting degree is an essential component of QA for conference interpreters working for international organisations. It is also suggested that interpreter competencies should encompass knowledge about the institutional conventions and interpreters need to acquire such knowledge through training, theoretical as well as practical (Gile, 2005; Setton & Dawrant, 2016). Based on their experiences of learning IS interpreting in practice on an ad hoc basis, the interviewees in this study provide suggestions for components that they see as essential in any future training for IS conference interpreters, for example peer-mentoring and team interpreting.

As is evident in the statistics from international organisations such as the UN and the EU, the thirty accredited WFD-WASLI IS interpreters cannot meet the growing demand for IS conference interpreters. This study showed that of those respondents who are non-accredited (but practising) IS interpreters, only a handful have applied to WFD-WASLI. This might be due to the lack of

awareness of the IS accreditation system and its prerequisites, suggesting a need to improve the public messaging around the accreditation. An increased awareness might then also encourage those non-accredited interpreters who currently indicate they are hesitant to apply. In addition, to reflect the language regimes in international organisations, the WFD-WASLI accreditation would benefit from a further global representation in languages as well as interpreters and members on the WFD-WASLI accreditation bodies.

The survey and interviews were carried out in 2019, and thus the results represent pre-Covid-19 pandemic practices. A future study could document the effects of the pandemic on the QA of IS conference interpreters, for example, with regard to remote interpreting. In addition, the WFD-WASLI accreditation system is a work in progress. The analysis of this study was completed in June 2021 and the findings were presented at the WASLI online conference in July 2021 (de Wit, 2021). Thereafter, additional interpreters were accredited (WASLI, n.d.) and some new accreditation features were added, such as the possibility to work between IS and Spanish or French. In addition, interpreters can now apply as a pre-accredited interpreter and work towards accreditation (as per AIIC). This will improve the QA of IS conference interpreters. Additionally, the WFD-WASLI accreditation system could be further enhanced by increasing the transparency of the WFD-WASLI accreditation process.

Furthermore, as the quality of interpreting is an important consideration not only for interpreters, but also for the recipients of interpretation, future studies should also explore the perspectives of deaf and hearing end users that participate in international organisation events about the provision of IS interpreting and its QA requirements. This would allow for a more nuanced discussion of IS conference interpreting.

In summary, although the WFD-WASLI QA system for IS conference interpreters meets an important current need of international organisations, practitioner perspectives on current practices reveal that further consideration is needed to align the professional standards of spoken language and IS conference interpreters working for international organisations, ultimately leading to overall higher quality of conference interpreting.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix 1 – Individual interview questions

Ideology & professional identity:
1. Where do you place yourself as an IS interpreter in the global interpreting community – describe your position/views?
2. How do you see the IS interpreting community?
3. What is your definition of an IS interpreter?
4. What does it mean to you to be accredited/not accredited by WFD-WASLI?

Skills & characteristics:
1. What other (than NSL) competencies/skills do you need when interpreting into and from IS?
2. How should new interpreters become an IS interpreter: pathway/route, must-do's to get there?

How do you describe:
1. The character traits of a competent IS interpreter?
2. The skills of a competent IS interpreter?

Development of the IS interpreting profession:
1. How do you see your future as an IS interpreter and the IS interpreter in general?
2. Is IS interpreting for those who are based in Europe, or who know certain languages (English, ASL, BSL, AUSLAN)? If yes/no, why?
3. What should be the core competences of the training of IS interpreters?

Review of your career - additional questions?
Looking back at your career, do you see a change in how you have worked:
1. How often you work as an IS interpreter (less, more, same)?
2. Where you work as an IS interpreter
3. Developments in the community?

Appendix 2

For a detailed description of the themes, see: https://www.mayadewit.nl/phd-research-study-3

List of themes on accreditation

Awareness of IS Interpreter Accreditation *Says something about the societal consequences and considerations of having the accreditation system*	Becoming Accredited *Says something about the process of becoming accredited*
Aware of existence	Big gap from NSL to IS
Benefits	Experienced NSL interpreter
Creates a divide	Goal to become accredited
Endangering NSLI	Working towards accreditation
For which settings	Applied - failed
Good basis	Applied - succeeded
Sensitizing deaf persons	Feedback on application
Setting standards	General
Standards in IS interpreting	History
Standards – AIIC	Obstacles
Standards – other organizations	Political power
	Representation
	Review/change
	Test
	Transparency

Accreditation Structure *Says something about the content/structure of the accreditation system*	Pool of IS Interpreters *Says something about the IS interpreters*
Criteria - general	Accredited - professional responsibilities
Criteria - interpreting degree	Auditory status
Defining who is an IS interpreter	Deaf communities' connection
Directionality	Elite
For which interpreters	Expand IS int. capacity
Professionalization	Languages
Regional differences IS	Levels/categories
Structure	Regional lack of accr. interpreters
	Representation

List of themes on training

Learning IS *How interpreters learn IS*	IS Interpreter Requirements/Criteria for Training
General	Certification / licensing
Online	Degree - interpreting
Practice	Degree - other (university)
Self-study	General knowledge - needed
Starting	Languages - knowing more than 1 SL
Variations	Languages - knowledge of multiple languages
While growing up	Self-assessment

Experiencing IS and IS Interpreting *How interpreters can gain experience*	IS Interpreter Training Structure *Comments on the training structure of IS interpreters*
Cooperate & learn with deaf interpreter	As a NSL interpreter
Experienced - NSL interpreter	Assessment during
Experiences - how to learn through an interpreter	Assessment prior
Experiences - IS interpreting	Conference interpreting
Experiences IS - travel, interactions, international events	Continuous professional development
Exposure to IS	Curriculum for IS interpreting
Learning IS interpreting - by volunteering	Defining IS and IS interpreting
Learning IS interpreting - on the job	English as a barrier
Mentoring programme needed	English most accessible
Mentors needed	For deaf interpreters (DI)
Observing deaf IS signers	Formal
Observing IS interpreters	Global differences
Passing on knowledge & skills to other interpreters	In SL environment
	Informal
	Lack
	Level
	Mix of DI & HI
	No specialisations
	Resources/materials

IS Interpreter Training Content *Considerations on the content of the training of IS interpreters*	
Adapting to cultural contexts	Message analysis
Adapting to linguistic variations	Multi-cultural awareness
Building knowledge on different topics	Practice is interpreting
Creating concepts	Preparing for an interpreting assignment
Creativity with sign languages	Protocol of IS interpreting
Cross cultural mediation	SL linguistics & deaf culture
Disconnect from English (source)	Synonyms (rehearse)
English, interpreting from and to	Taking/giving relay
Ethics	Tasters in different SLs
Expressing visual images	Team interpreting
Grammar (carries the meaning)	Text to IS
How to interpret for a broad audience	Theory of interpreting
Increase language competency	Topic specific
Increased processing time	Use all resources (in the room)
IS <> NSL	Vocabulary IS
IS interpreting strategies	
IS variations	