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# ‘Telephone interpreting should be used only as a last resort.’ Interpreters’ perceptions of the suitability, remuneration and quality of telephone interpreting

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## ABSTRACT

This article reports on selected findings from a survey of 465 telephone interpreters in Australia, focusing on their opinions about the suitability, remuneration and quality of telephone interpreting. Results of this study revealed serious problems, such as telephone interpreting being used in inappropriate situations, and interpreters’ dissatisfaction with the low remuneration for telephone interpreting. The majority of interpreters preferred on-site interpreting to telephone interpreting. However, interpreters’ views on the accuracy of telephone interpretation versus on-site interpretation varied considerably. The key finding is that interpreters proposed various measures that would enhance the quality of telephone interpreting, indicating that interpreters, clients and interpreter employers need to work together to achieve that goal. These findings have implications for developing national protocols for telephone interpreting.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## 1. Introduction

The term ‘remote interpreting’ refers to ‘the use of communication technology for gaining access to an interpreter who is in another room, building, city or country and who is linked to the primary participants by telephone or videoconference’ (Braun, 2015a, p. 346). Remote interpreting includes telephone interpreting, videoconference interpreting and video relay interpreting – the first two are associated with spoken language interpreting and the third signed language interpreting. Remote interpreting has been widely used for simultaneous, consecutive and dialogue interpreting in numerous settings, mainly to optimise access to qualified interpreters, save time, travel and money, and achieve efficiency gains (Braun, 2015a, 2015b; Kelly & Pöchhacker, 2015). As the most common form of remote interpreting, telephone interpreting is predominantly used for dialogue interpreting in the consecutive mode in community settings.

Remote interpreting has sparked debates about feasibility, acceptability, suitability, working conditions, performance quality, special training, the interpreter’s role and ethics, mainly due to the interpreter’s physical distance and limited or no visual access. The interpreter’s physical distance affects the interpersonal communication in

interpreter-mediated interaction, particularly turn-taking, coordination, the establishment of rapport between clients and the facilitation of intercultural understanding (Braun, 2015b; Kelly & Pöchhacker, 2015; Price, Pérez-Stable, Nickleach, López & Karliner, 2012; Rosenberg, 2007; Wadensjö, 1999). Communication consists of language (verbal information), paralinguage (vocal non-verbal information, e.g. prosody, hesitation, inflection, tone of voice, vocal volume) and kinesics (visual non-verbal information, e.g. gesture, eye gaze, facial expression, other body language) (see Rennert, 2015). Since visual non-verbal information can add information, support, repeat, reinforce, weaken or contradict verbal information, the absence of visual cues in telephone interpreting can cause ambiguity, confusion, turn-taking problems, overlapping speech and other task-related challenges (Cheng, 2015; Rosenberg 2007; Wang, [under review](#)). These issues thus affect the dynamics of the three-party communication and raise concerns over the quality of telephone interpreting and its suitability for complex situations. It is believed that having optimal visual and auditory access to speakers, the audience and visual materials is vital for the interpreter to ensure thorough comprehension (Rennert, 2015), accurate interpretation and effective communication.

To date, there has been a distinct lack of empirical research on telephone interpreting, despite the widespread use and fast growth of telephone interpreting services in many countries. The current large-scale survey study focuses on interpreters' opinions about the suitability, remuneration and quality of telephone interpreting. A brief overview of relevant literature is presented below, to contextualise the design of this research.

## 2. Overview

This section reviews empirical studies on the quality of telephone interpreting, describes the advantages and disadvantages of telephone interpreting, and discusses critical issues related to it.

Studies on the quality of telephone interpreting vary from gathering interpreters' and users' 'subjective' perceptions of it to using objective measures to assess interpreting performance. Price et al. (2012) found that interpreters perceived in-person, telephone and videoconference interpreting as equally satisfactory for information exchange, but significantly preferred in-person interpreting over telephone interpreting for establishing rapport between doctors and patients and for facilitating doctors' understanding of patients' social and cultural backgrounds. In addition, Locatis et al. (2010) found that interpreters and doctors liked in-person interpreting most, followed by videoconference interpreting, and liked telephone interpreting least due to poor sound quality and the absence of visual cues. Furthermore, based on two real-life police interviews, Wadensjö (1999) compared telephone interpreting and face-to-face interpreting, and found a lack of fluency and smooth turn-taking in the telephone-interpreter-mediated interaction. She concluded that the two modalities differed in the possibilities they allowed for participants to coordinate the interaction and synchronise the talk. Additionally, Wang and Fang's ([in press](#)) comparison of telephone interpreting and on-site interpreting in simulated public service encounters revealed that a professional interpreter produced similarly accurate interpretations

over the phone and face-to-face. They also found that the interpreter had to intervene with the primary interlocutors more often over the phone than on-site, mainly due to poor sound quality and the lack of visual access. Given that both comparative studies were small-scale, the results cannot be generalised and more large-scale comparative studies are needed.

The rapid development of telephone interpreting since its establishment in 1973 in Australia has been partially due to its advantages. The main motivation for customer institutions to use telephone interpreting is to save money (Gracia-García, 2002; see also Mikkelsen, 2003), as telephone interpreters are only paid by the minutes they interpret. Apart from cost-effectiveness, other merits of telephone interpreting include quick and greater access to qualified interpreters in almost any language; confidentiality and impartiality; professional distance; the convenience of not having to travel; the ability to serve the community by helping people overcome language barriers; and the fact that it allows interpreters to accept more interpreting work, work comfortably from home, make the most of their spare time, choose flexible working hours and use dictionaries and online resources during interpreting (Cheng, 2015; Gracia-García, 2002; Lee, 2007; Mikkelsen, 2003; Rosenberg, 2007; Wang, *under review*). Telephone interpreting hence appears to be a useful complement to on-site interpreting under certain circumstances.

The disadvantages of telephone interpreting, however, seem to outnumber its advantages. Challenges in telephone interpreting include the lack of visual access, the interpreter's physical distance, poor sound quality, poor quality of clients' English and/or languages other than English (LOTE), diverse topics and unfamiliar terminology, a lack of preparation, overlapping speech, users' lack of knowledge about how to work effectively with interpreters over the phone, users' unfamiliarity with the telephone interpreter's role, some users' unprofessionalism and rude attitudes towards telephone interpreters, low remuneration, casual employment, inconvenience due to the irregularity and unpredictability of phone calls, the unpleasant content of some phone calls, clients' inappropriate use of telephone interpreting services, physical discomfort, work-related stress and a lack of support from interpreter employers (Cheng, 2015; Gracia-García, 2002; Kelly, 2008; Lee, 2007; Mikkelsen, 2003; Rosenberg, 2007; Wadensjö, 1999; Wang, *under review*). These challenges indicate that telephone interpreting is no easy work.

Critical issues surrounding telephone interpreting include poor working conditions, inadequate training of all parties and low remuneration. For optimal sound quality, customer institutions need to use dual handset phones, and telephone interpreters need to use good headsets with a mute button, separate dual volume control and an amplifier (Gracia-García, 2002; Mikkelsen, 2003). Other technological improvements involve replacing telephone interpreting with videoconference interpreting, and using instant messaging or digital scanning to allow telephone interpreters to sight translate documents in real time (Kelly, 2008; Mikkelsen, 2003). Moreover, interpreters need to undergo telephone interpreting training to learn how to manage turn-taking, listen for vocal non-verbal information, improve memory and note-taking skills, familiarise themselves with clients' terminology and utilise effective communicative techniques (Kelly, 2008; Mikkelsen, 2003). Additionally, clients need to receive training on the telephone interpreter's role and how to work effectively with interpreters over the phone,

such as being aware of the challenges in telephone interpreting, briefing the interpreters about the context and topic of phone calls, providing repetitions/clarifications/pauses when requested, as well as speaking one person at a time, in short chunks, clearly and at a normal speed (Kelly, 2008; Wang, [under review](#)). Users also need to understand that telephone interpreting is inappropriate for certain circumstances and clients, such as legal settings (especially lengthy trials), mental health consultations, group meetings, children, the hard of hearing, the elderly and the mentally ill (Gracia-García, 2002; Kelly, 2008; Mikkelsen, 2003). Furthermore, interpreters in Australia have voiced frustration with the low remuneration for telephone interpreting, and with the remuneration being unassociated with their accreditation level and interpreting experience (Lee, 2007; Wang, [under review](#)). Empirical research is needed to seek solutions to these issues.

In summary, there is no consensus on the quality of telephone interpreting performance compared with on-site interpreting performance, due to the significant lack of comparative studies. Interpreters appear to prefer on-site interpreting to telephone interpreting. Despite its advantages, telephone interpreting has many disadvantages and raises concerns over poor working conditions, insufficient training of all parties and poor remuneration. A noticeable gap in previous studies is how to improve the quality of telephone interpreting – a question that this study aims to address.

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Aims

The aims of this study are to explore telephone interpreters' perceptions of where telephone interpreting should be avoided, remuneration, preference between telephone interpreting and on-site interpreting, the accuracy of telephone interpretation compared to face-to-face interpretation, and how to enhance the quality of telephone interpreting.

#### 3.2. The survey

The 29-item English questionnaire was developed by referring to previous studies, and was delivered online using SurveyMonkey software. It included four sections: (i) interpreters' demographic profile (Q1–9), (ii) their telephone interpreting experience (Q10–21), (iii) the telephone interpreter's role (Q22–25), and (iv) their opinions about the quality of telephone interpreting (Q26–29). There were four open questions and 25 closed questions, with 15 closed questions having an 'other (please specify)' option for respondents to provide written comments. Given the large dataset, only selected findings regarding the research aims above are presented in this paper, with other findings reported elsewhere (Wang, [under review](#)). Ethics approval was obtained for the study.

#### 3.3. Procedure

The only recruitment criterion was that participants should have telephone interpreting experience in Australia. For recruitment purposes, a flyer was distributed through supporting organisations<sup>1</sup> to interpreters in their databases. Interpreters who were interested in participating in this research could access the online survey (open from 16 May to 21

June 2016) by visiting a website link on the flyer. Quantitative data regarding the answer options was analysed using descriptive statistics and Chi-square test for independence (for cross-tabulation). Qualitative data of respondents' open-ended comments was analysed using thematic analysis.

## 4. Results and discussion

This section first describes the sample's demographic profile and working patterns, then presents their views on where telephone interpreting should be avoided, pay rates, preference between telephone interpreting and on-site interpreting, the accuracy of telephone interpretation versus on-site interpretation, and how to enhance the quality of telephone interpreting.

### 4.1. Demographic profile

A total of 465 interpreters across Australia completed the survey. This sample size does not include those who completed the questionnaire but whose answers showed that they had no telephone interpreting experience in Australia, or those who only answered a few questions before withdrawing from the survey. Some of the 465 interpreters inadvertently skipped a few questions; therefore, the number of respondents for each question varied (see below).

Of the 455 interpreters who answered the question about gender, two thirds (300, 66%) were female and one third (155, 34%) were male. Regarding age, 31 interpreters (7%) were in their twenties, 117 (25%) in their thirties, 95 (20%) in their forties, 104 (22%) in their fifties, 87 (19%) in their sixties, and 31 (7%) in their seventies.

In relation to qualifications, slightly more than half of 460 respondents (261, 57%) had completed formal interpreting education and training, whereas the other 199 (43%) were untrained interpreters. Among the trained interpreters, 69 (15%) held post-graduate degrees in interpreting, 19 (4%) university undergraduate degrees in interpreting, 61 (13%) an Advanced Diploma of Interpreting, 79 (17%) a Diploma of Interpreting, 27 (6%) interpreting qualifications lower than diploma, and 6 (1%) unclear interpreting qualifications in terms of level. It is worth mentioning that formal interpreting training programmes in Australia have rarely included modules on telephone interpreting. This is partly because NAATI accreditation exams on interpreting before 2018 did not assess candidates' telephone interpreting skills. In reality, interpreters largely develop telephone interpreting skills on the job through experience.

Regarding NAATI accreditation, 431 (93%) of 464 respondents were NAATI-accredited interpreters, including 224 (48%) paraprofessional interpreters, 204 (44%) professional interpreters, 2 conference interpreters and 1 senior conference interpreter. In addition, 17 (4%) respondents held NAATI recognition, which recognises the interpreting competence of bilinguals who use less common languages in which NAATI testing is unavailable. The remaining 16 (3%) respondents did not have NAATI accreditation or recognition. Respondents came from 65 language pairs.

In summary, the demographic data shows that a typical telephone interpreter in Australia is a female, paraprofessional or professional interpreter who has undertaken formal interpreter training at a vocational or tertiary institute.

**Table 1.** Respondents' telephone interpreting experience.

Telephone interpreting experience (years)	No. of interpreters (N)	Percentage (%)
0–5	232	52
6–10	93	21
11–15	37	8
16–20	32	7
21–25	19	4
26–30	17	4
31–35	8	2
36–40	9	2
41–45	2	0
Total	449	100

## 4.2. Working patterns

### 4.2.1. Telephone interpreting experience

As Table 1 shows, of the 449 respondents who supplied information about telephone interpreting experience, 232 (52%) had no more than five years of experience and 93 (21%) had six to 10 years of experience. Interestingly, as the amount of telephone interpreting experience increased, the number of interpreters decreased. These results indicate that telephone interpreting work mainly attracts novice interpreters, rather than highly experienced interpreters, and that as practitioners get more experienced they tend to quit telephone interpreting.

### 4.2.2. Working on a casual basis for multiple employers

According to interpreters' answers about employers, telephone interpreting providers in Australia include 31 private translation and interpreting companies, four government-funded translation and interpreting agencies, a number of hospitals, as well as some government organisations and private companies that employ interpreters on a full- or part-time basis. Further analyses showed that nearly half of the 465 interpreters (227, 49%) were simultaneously registered with three or more interpreting agencies. This finding reflects the reality that, as interpreters are typically employed as casual contractors, they usually sign up with multiple employers to obtain enough work.

### 4.2.3. Interpreting hours and amount of telephone interpreting work

All 465 respondents answered the question: 'On average, how many hours of interpreting (all kinds of interpreting work) do you do per week?' The highest percentage (37%, 171) was those participants who interpreted on average less than 10 hours per week, followed by 10–19 hours a week (25%, 117), 20–29 hours a week (19%, 87), 30–39 hours every week (11%, 53), 40–49 hours per week (5%, 21), and 50 hours or more each week (3%, 16). In summary, the longer the interpreting hours per week, the fewer the respondents. This reflects the fact that interpreters typically work as casual contractors, without job security and income stability.

Furthermore, 431 interpreters provided the percentages of their telephone and on-site interpreting work. Slightly more than half of the respondents (231, 54%) performed more face-to-face than telephone interpreting. In contrast, 151 (35%) worked more often over the phone than on-site. The remaining 49 (11%) worked equally frequently in both modalities.



**Table 2.** Respondents in relation to the number of telephone interpreting assignments per week.

Number of telephone interpreting assignments per week	No. of interpreters (N)	Percentage (%)
Fewer than 10	232	50
10–29	114	25
30–49	49	11
50–69	26	6
70–89	18	4
At least 90	21	5
Total	460	100

A total of 460 respondents answered the question about how many telephone interpreting assignments they completed per week on average, with the breakdown shown in Table 2. Half of the sample (232) completed fewer than 10 telephone interpreting assignments each week. Additionally, 25% of the sample (114) completed 10–29 telephone interpreting assignments on a weekly basis. Taken together, the majority of interpreters did not engage actively in telephone interpreting work, perhaps due to its irregularity and lack of attraction for interpreters. The results also showed a negative correlation between the number of interpreters and the number of telephone interpreting assignments completed per week.

### 4.3. Suitability

#### 4.3.1. Topics of telephone interpreting assignments

All 465 interpreters gave multiple answers to a question - a closed question with an 'other (please specify)' option - about the topics of their telephone interpreting assignments. An analysis of their multiple choice answers revealed the following top 10 topics: medical appointments (394, 85%), utility bills (283, 61%), public housing (272, 59%), legal settings such as tribunals, courts and prisons (266, 57%), mental health consultations (239, 52%), social welfare payment (226, 49%), insurance (220, 47%), police interviews (204, 44%), domestic violence (196, 42%) and child support (child maintenance fee that one divorced parent pays to the other parent; 193, 42%). Furthermore, an analysis of 140 interpreters' text responses to the 'other (please specify)' option unveiled additional topics, including immigration, public services, education, business, financing, tourism and community services (e.g. aged care). Each of these macro topics includes numerous scenarios. These results indicate that diverse topics, unfamiliar terminology and a lack of pre-task preparation are huge challenges for telephone interpreters, who need to have vast encyclopaedic and domain-specific knowledge to overcome these difficulties.

#### 4.3.2. Situations and clients for which telephone interpreting is inappropriate

A linked question pertained to identifying situations and clients that telephone interpreting is inappropriate for. Interpreters could choose multiple answers from a number of answer options given to them and provide written comments on the 'other (please specify)' option.

From the interpreters' perspective, telephone interpreting should be avoided in the following situations (please note that the first two points in the list were answer options given



to participants, and the others were themes that emerged from 103 participants' written comments):

1. Conversations with high emotional content (213),
2. Conversations about life or death (196),
3. Legal settings such as courts, tribunals, detention centres, police interviews, and immigration interviews centre (20),
4. Medical settings, especially mental health consultations (14),
5. Other highly complex matters such as interviews (17),
6. Scenarios requiring the interpreter's sight translation of documents such as medical consent forms, court orders and immigration letters (11),
7. Lengthy sessions such as court trials (10),
8. Situations with poor audibility or inappropriate equipment (10),
9. Communication involving more than two clients (e.g. tribunal hearings, group meetings) where it is difficult to manage turn-taking (6),
10. Communication involving substantial visual information (5).

Some representative quotes illustrating the above views are presented below:

For police interviews, it is much better to do on-site interpreting because sometimes the accused may be shown documents or may be asked to draw pictures. If it is phone interpreting, the interpreter won't be able to see that. (Professional Mandarin/English and Cantonese/English interpreter)

[Telephone interpreting should be avoided in] Any situation in which body language is an important part of the assessment. To not see who you are talking to increases stress, anxiety and anger; and it takes much more focus to understand what is being said. (Professional Italian/English interpreter)

Mental health sessions SHOULD NEVER (emphasis in original text) be conducted on the phone. It's NOT FAIR for the non-English-speaking clients, simply because A LOT OF THINGS ARE MISSED over the phone for reasons such as absence of visual cues. (Professional Vietnamese/English interpreter)

I do not believe telephone interpreting to be adequate for medical interviews, due to the poor quality of hospitals' equipment for telephone interpreting services, and that most patients are quite old. I love healthcare interpreting on-site. (Professional Italian/English interpreter)

The quotes above highlight two serious problems with telephone interpreting: lack of visual access and poor sound quality. Telephone interpreting is inappropriate for situations in which visual materials, body language and visual cues are crucial for the success of the three-party communication, particularly mental health consultations and legal settings. The lack of visual access not only leads to increased stress, anxiety and anger, but also requires the interpreter to concentrate more on comprehension, indicating that it may increase psychological stress and cognitive load for the interpreter. Moreover, poor sound quality due to hospitals' and police stations' use of equipment inappropriate for telephone interpreting services (phone passing, speaker phones, etc.) is a prevalent and severe problem, indicating the need for public service organisations to invest in dual handset phones and videoconference interpreting facilities. These perceptions are consistent with the claims in previous studies that being able to see and hear clients clearly is vital

for interpreters to interpret accurately (Cheng, 2015; Rennert, 2015; Rosenberg, 2007; Wang, [under review](#)).

Furthermore, interpreters in this study maintained that telephone interpreting is inappropriate for the following user groups (please note that the first four points in the list were answer options provided to participants, and the others were themes that emerged from 103 participants' written comments):

1. Hard-of-hearing clients (394),
2. Clients with mental illness (267),
3. Elderly clients (201),
4. Clients with heavy accents in English and/or LOTE (181),
5. Clients with low levels of understanding due to a lack of maturity, a low level of education, clouded judgment, or impaired insight because of certain emotional issues or trauma (6),
6. Aggressive or rude clients (4),
7. Clients in danger of self-harm (1).

Two typical quotes regarding elderly and aggressive clients are presented below:

With very old clients it is difficult – I have to explain to clients what is happening at times. (Professional German/English and Hungarian/English interpreter)

For people in prisons and detention centres, telephone interpreting is useless. When you talk, you feel their emotions. Most of the time they are aggressive and revengeful. They get angry with the interpreter as well. (Professional Sinhalese/English interpreter)

According to respondents, the main reasons why telephone interpreting is inappropriate for the aforementioned situations and clients are poor sound quality, comprehension problems, coordination difficulties (especially turn-taking), as well as stress and frustration for the interpreter and/or the clients. For these situations and clients, on-site interpreting is more effective than telephone interpreting. These findings bring an added perspective to those reported in the existing literature (see Gracia-García, 2002; Kelly, 2008; Mikkelsen, 2003; NAJIT, 2009).

Interestingly, Chi-square tests revealed that the proportion of professional interpreters who deemed telephone interpreting inappropriate for elderly clients was significantly higher than the proportion of paraprofessional interpreters who thought so. This result pattern regarding elderly clients also applied to clients with mental health problems. These findings indicate that professional interpreters seem to be more aware of the limitations of telephone interpreting than paraprofessional interpreters.

A striking finding is that telephone interpreting is actually used in situations that it is inappropriate for, such as mental health consultations, legal settings (tribunals, prisons, police interviews, etc.) (see Section 4.3.1). This is alarming and underlines the need for educating clients about when to avoid telephone interpreting and use on-site interpreting instead. This also stresses the need for developing national protocols to inform users about when and how to use telephone interpreting services appropriately. Telephone interpreting services should only be used when no qualified interpreters are available on-site (NAJIT, 2009), as expressed in the two quotes below:

Telephone interpreting should be used only as a last resort, only when it is extremely difficult to get an on-site interpreter, or in real emergencies. (Paraprofessional Hindi/English interpreter)

Telephone interpreting should only be used as a last resort of communication when there isn't an on-site interpreter available and never for mental disorders assessments. (Professional Greek/English interpreter)

If telephone interpreting has to be used in highly demanding situations, such as medical and legal settings, some conditions must be met, such as comprehensive training for all parties, the use of appropriate equipment to ensure good sound quality, teamwork between all parties, providing preparation materials to the interpreter, and briefing the interpreter (Kelly, 2008; NAJIT, 2009). The current problem is that telephone interpreting is being used in these challenging scenarios, but the required conditions are not met.

#### 4.4. Remuneration

Based on the researcher's contracts with interpreting agencies, remuneration for interpreting a single 15-minute phone call ranges from AUD10 to AUD12.50, whereas the remuneration for interpreting a single one-hour phone call varies from AUD30 to AUD37. That is, interpreters are better off interpreting short calls than long ones.

In this study, 62% of 459 respondents regarded the remuneration for telephone interpreting either very unsatisfactory (20%) or unsatisfactory (42%); 31% viewed it acceptable; and the remaining 7% deemed it either satisfactory (6%) or very satisfactory (1%). The satisfaction level was lower among professional interpreters than among paraprofessional interpreters, with 68% of professional interpreters versus 59% of paraprofessional interpreters being dissatisfied with the remuneration for telephone interpreting. These findings are consistent with previous research (Lee, 2007).

Interpreters complained that the remuneration was low and indifferent, as illustrated by the quotes below:

Telephone interpreters are very poorly paid. We are not briefed and we are not given time or materials to prepare for some sessions which should not be conducted over the phone, causing much stress for us to do on-the-spot telephone interpreting. More and more inappropriate sessions are conducted through telephone interpreting (e.g. family meetings, hospital pre-admission clinic, elderly clients who have trouble with face-to-face communication let alone over the telephone). (Professional Serbian/English interpreter)

There is a lack of protocol or standard for telephone interpreting. Good interpreters are not getting proper remuneration for their skills. (Professional Mandarin/English interpreter)

Three solutions emerged from the respondents' narrative comments. Firstly, the remuneration for telephone interpreting should be commensurate with that for on-site interpreting, taking into account the stress and difficulties in telephone interpreting due to the lack of visual cues. Secondly, national protocols for telephone interpreting should not only specify reasonable remuneration but also differentiate pay rates according to practitioners' formal interpreting training, accreditation level and interpreting experience. Thirdly, national protocols should outline that telephone interpreting should only be used for emergencies, simple and short conversations, and situations where it is impossible to obtain on-site interpreters in a timely manner.

#### 4.5. Preference between telephone interpreting and on-site interpreting

The majority of 460 respondents (268, 58%) preferred on-site interpreting to telephone interpreting; 70 (15%) held the opposite view; 21 (5%) liked both equally; and the remaining 101 (22%) perceived that their preferences depended on various factors. Thematic analysis of their comments revealed that these factors included (i) value for service<sup>2</sup> (remuneration relative to travel time, distance, traffic, parking fees and the duration of assignments), (ii) the nature and topics of interpreting assignments, (iii) interpreters' aspiration for both accuracy and interpersonal communication, (iv) their availability for work, (v) time of interpreting assignments, (vi) the number of clients, (vii) clients' attitudes towards interpreters and (viii) interpreters' personal circumstances. Some of these factors are illustrated by the following remarks:

I prefer on-site interpreting because of the easier conditions of work, but the pay isn't worth the time and money that I spend travelling to and from assignments, and there aren't enough on-site jobs to make up for full-time work. (Professional Persian/English interpreter)

Value for service. I wouldn't mind doing either, if they were properly remunerated and telephone interpreting assignments were kept to simple conversations, not mental health assessments or the like. ... What people don't realise is that greater concentration is required for telephone interpreting than face-to-face interpreting precisely because all the visual non-verbal information (e.g. body language) is missing. (Professional Serbian/English interpreter)

For short and easy issues, I prefer telephone interpreting, but for medical and critical matters, I prefer to go on-site. (Paraprofessional Farsi/English interpreter)

I prefer on-site interpreting because it is much more accurate and professional, but most agencies and clients are opting for phone interpreting and sacrificing the quality of interpreting. So, when there are enough on-site assignments to fill my day, I'd rather do that than logging on the phone. (Professional Arabic/English interpreter)

I love the interpersonal contact with people when interpreting on-site. I am less isolated. It brings less frustration for the parties involved. Phone interpreting means less effort for me to get ready, dress for the occasion, drive and pay for the cost involved. (Professional Spanish/English interpreter)

The quotes above highlight the advantages and disadvantages of either modality. It is interesting to note that some interpreters perceived that telephone interpreting required more concentration than on-site interpreting due to the lack of visual access, and that several interpreters observed that many customer institutions were switching from using on-site interpreting services to using telephone interpreting services. Empirical studies are required to examine whether these views reflect the real situation.

Interestingly, some practitioners liked a perfect combination of both modalities, as expressed below:

I like both. I like phone interpreting because I don't have to move from the comfort of my home interpreting studio. I like doing on-site interpreting two to three times a week, because I get out and about and because I get exercise as I cycle to my jobs. (Professional Greek/English interpreter)

The finding that most interpreters preferred on-site interpreting to telephone interpreting corroborates with previous research (Locatis et al., 2010; Price et al., 2012). While previous studies found that this preference was attributable to the interpersonal communication in on-site interpreting, such as establishing rapport between clients and facilitating clients' understanding of each other's social and cultural information, the present study revealed additional reasons, such as on-site interpreting involving better working conditions, higher accuracy and more professionalism. A new finding is that interpreters' preference between face-to-face interpreting and telephone interpreting depends on various factors, indicating that preference is subjective, complex and dynamic rather than straightforward and static.

#### 4.6. Quality of telephone interpreting

The findings detailed in this section contribute new knowledge to the available literature.

##### 4.6.1. Accuracy of telephone interpretation versus on-site interpretation

The interpreters were asked about whether they perceived telephone interpretation to be as accurate as on-site interpretation. Their opinions varied, with 183 (40%) interpreters stating 'Yes, equally accurate', 168 (37%) 'No, telephone interpretation is less accurate', 5 (1%) 'No, telephone interpretation is more accurate', and 103 (22%) 'It depends on various factors'. Thematic analysis of the interpreters' open-ended comments revealed that the following seven macro factors might impact the accuracy of telephone and on-site interpretation:

1. Clients (48): their understanding of the purpose and context of the communication, their communicative skills, how they speak (accent, speed, volume, etc.), the quality of their English and/or LOTE, the number of clients, their age, personality, emotional status, level of understanding and education, understanding of other cultures, mutual relations, perceptions of their own roles in the communication, ability to manage the communication, whether they have worked with interpreters previously, familiarity with the interpreter's role, expectations of the interpreter, and how well they work with the interpreter. The quote below illustrates how clients' way of speaking influences interpreting performance and the interpreter's coping strategies:

If the English-speaking professional insists on talking too fast with long chunks, 100% accuracy will be affected. So I have to decide either to keep reminding him or her to slow down or keep asking for repetition or excuse myself from continuing by explaining that the accuracy of my interpretation might be affected. (Paraprofessional Arabic/English interpreter)

2. Sound quality (31): whether clients use appropriate equipment and whether there is background noise. As expressed in the quote below, telephone interpretation can be as accurate as on-site interpretation if certain conditions are met:

If the sound quality is good and the parties know how to work with an interpreter, accuracy can be as good. (Professional French/English interpreter)

3. Topics and content (29): the nature and complexity level of topics, the interpreter's familiarity with the subject matters and terminology, whether there is prior preparation and briefing, whether numbers are mentioned, and whether words are clearly spelled

out (e.g. possible confusion between ‘B’ and ‘D’). The remarks below illustrate that on-site interpretation is more accurate when it comes to complex topics and non-verbal communication:

For a straightforward exchange of information, telephone interpreting is as accurate as on-site interpreting. But for most topics that are contextual in nature and involve non-verbal communication that helps with the clarity and understanding of the clients, on-site interpreting is so much more effective than telephone interpreting. (Professional Indonesian/English interpreter)

4. Situations (10). Some interpreters expressed the view that it would be easier for them to interpret effectively on-site than over the phone in certain settings, such as court trials, police interviews, immigration interviews, mental health consultations, highly emotional situations, group discussions, and cases where documents need to be sight-translated, as illustrated by the quote below:

In certain situations – like courts, customer-provider disputes, medical consultations and legal consultations – it is necessary to have an on-site interpreter as there are documents to be referred to and discussed, plus, it is easier for the interpreter to interpret accurately and to avoid miscommunication. (Professional Arabic/English interpreter)

5. The interpreter (4): the interpreter’s interpreting skills, general education level, formal interpreting training, interpreting experience, familiarity with the subject matter, attentive listening skills and mood.
6. Time (3): the time of interpreting assignments (e.g. 9am versus midnight), the length of interpreting assignments, and whether clients are in a hurry to finish their appointments mediated by the interpreter (e.g. doctors may be pressed for time when meeting patients).

Interpreters’ discrepant views on the accuracy of telephone interpretation versus on-site interpretation indicate that the quality of interpreting performance is a complex issue that requires solid evidence and insights from comparative studies. The quality parameters identified by interpreters in this study complement those reported in the available literature (Gracia-García, 2002; Kelly, 2008; Wang, [under review](#)). These quality parameters can be integrated into the training for all parties of interpreter-mediated interactions to raise their awareness about the complexity of performance quality and how they can work together to ensure high-quality interpreting performance.

#### *4.6.2. Measures to improve the quality of telephone interpreting*

A follow-up question was asked regarding how the accuracy and efficacy of telephone interpretation can be improved. Interpreters’ responses to the answer options are presented below:

1. Clients always brief telephone interpreters about the topic and context of phone calls (343, 74%),
2. Clients talk one at a time (327, 70%),
3. Interpreting agencies educate their clients (English-speaking and non-English-speaking) about how to work effectively with interpreters over the phone (332, 71%),

4. Interpreting agencies educate their clients about the telephone interpreter's role (303, 65%),
5. Interpreters engage in special training and professional development workshops on telephone interpreting (210, 45%).

Interestingly, Chi-square tests showed that the proportion of professional interpreters who recommended clients do not talk on top of each other was significantly higher than the proportion of paraprofessional interpreters who recommended it. This result pattern also applied to the suggestion that agencies educate clients about how to work effectively with interpreters over the phone. These findings indicate that professional interpreters seem to be more demanding in terms of the working conditions needed in order to interpret accurately.

These responses were supplemented with 65 interpreters' narrative comments. The following eight measures to improve telephone interpreting performance emerged from those comments:

1. Ensure excellent sound quality (18). Clients speak in quiet places, use appropriate equipment for telephone interpreting, rather than using speaker phones and phone passing, and use the latest communication technologies (e.g. videoconference, instant messaging, digital scanning).
2. Develop national protocols that outline situations for which telephone interpreting should be avoided (4).
3. Raise the remuneration for telephone interpreting (4). Interpreters perceived that higher pay rates would attract highly skilled interpreters to interpret over the phone and retain them.
4. Telephone interpreters intervene with clients when needed (4).
5. Interpreters, clients and interpreting agencies attend joint training sessions to identify best practices of telephone interpreting (3).
6. Interpreter employers provide sufficient support to their telephone interpreters and treat them with respect (3). For example, operators need to obtain detailed contextual information about phone calls (in terms of nature, likely duration, etc.) from their clients and pass it on to telephone interpreters.
7. Interpreter employers and/or clients provide relevant documents and glossaries to telephone interpreters so that the latter can prepare for diverse topics, unfamiliar terminology and sight translation (3), as illustrated by the quote below:

Interpreting agencies need to obtain their clients' information, scripts and any relevant booklets and give them to their interpreters. Alternatively, interpreting agencies can encourage their clients to use Skype to resolve the issue of written documents to be interpreted [sight-translated] over the phone. (Paraprofessional Bosnian/English interpreter)

8. Replace telephone interpreting with videoconference interpreting, so that interpreters have visual access to clients (3).

These measures recommended by interpreters complement those reported in the existing literature (e.g. Gracia-García, 2002; Kelly, 2008; Mikkelsen, 2003). These findings indicate that all parties need to work collaboratively to improve the quality of telephone interpreting.



The limitations of this study need to be acknowledged. Interpreters' perceptions are subjective and discrepant; thus, comparative studies of authentic on-site interpreting and remote interpreting in terms of accuracy are needed. More scales (e.g. scales measuring the frequency of telephone interpreting being used in highly challenging situations) and open-ended questions should have been used in the questionnaire to provide more insights into certain issues and allow for greater cross-tabulation of data.

## 5. Conclusions

This study investigated interpreters' views on the suitability, remuneration and quality of telephone interpreting. One of the key findings is that interpreters identified various situations and clients for which telephone interpreting services are inappropriate (see Section 4.3.2); this merits the attention of users and interpreting agencies. Furthermore, the majority of practitioners were dissatisfied with the remuneration for telephone interpreting, with professional interpreters feeling more dissatisfied than paraprofessional interpreters. Additionally, the majority of interpreters preferred on-site interpreting to telephone interpreting, and interpreters identified a number of factors behind their preferences (see Section 4.5). Furthermore, interpreters' opinions about the accuracy of telephone interpretation compared with on-site interpretation varied, and they perceived that the quality of interpreting performance depended on a complex web of factors (see Section 4.6.1). More importantly, interpreters recommended a list of measures that would enhance the quality of telephone interpreting, indicating that all parties need to work together to achieve that goal. Interestingly, compared with paraprofessional interpreters, professional interpreters appear to be more aware of the limitations of telephone interpreting and more demanding of working conditions needed in order to interpret accurately.

These findings have implications for establishing national protocols for telephone interpreting. The protocols need to outline the following aspects:

1. Requirement of all clients to use appropriate equipment for telephone interpreting (dual handset phones, etc.).
2. Reasonable and differential remuneration for telephone interpreting, transparent contracting practices and appropriate payment systems,
3. Situations and client groups for which telephone interpreting is inappropriate,
4. Challenges in telephone interpreting and coping strategies,
5. Best practices of telephone interpreting, such as discourse frameworks regarding how clients brief the interpreter, how clients address each other (e.g. using the first- or third-person pronoun, using each other's first name, etc.), how clients notify the interpreter of useful non-verbal information, how the interpreter manages turn-taking, and how the interpreter requests repetitions/clarifications/pauses,
6. The specifics of client training (e.g. the telephone interpreter's role, how to work effectively with interpreters over the phone),
7. Training resources for telephone interpreters,
8. Interpreting agencies' responsibilities for their telephone interpreters (providing support, equipment, useful documents, more job security, reasonable remuneration, free training and professional development, etc.),

9. Quality control programmes and feedback mechanisms for telephone interpreters, end-users and interpreting agencies.

Further research is needed to compare real-life telephone interpreting with on-site interpreting in terms of both accuracy and explicit coordination. The researcher has obtained a grant to investigate end-users' (both English and non-English speakers') and interpreting agencies' perceptions of telephone interpreting, and to explore various issues in authentic telephone interpreting (e.g. performance quality, turn-taking techniques). Future research can also explore how interpreters who typically work on-site adapt to remote interpreting.

## Notes

1. These are Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS National), All Graduates Interpreting and Translating Services, the National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (NAATI), and Western Australian Institute of Translators and Interpreters Inc. The Australian Institute of Interpreters and Translators was approached for assistance with recruiting participants, but it did not agree to do so, for unclear reasons.
2. The remuneration for a single one-hour on-site interpreting assignment ranges from AUD62 to AUD80 (without considering unpaid travel cost), which is almost twice the remuneration for a single one-hour telephone interpreting assignment.

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## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

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