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To cite this article: Maya de Wit , Onno Crasborn & Jemina Napier (2021): Interpreting international sign: mapping the interpreter's profile, The Interpreter and Translator Trainer, DOI: [10.1080/1750399X.2020.1868172](https://doi.org/10.1080/1750399X.2020.1868172)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1750399X.2020.1868172>



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Published online: 25 Jan 2021.



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# Interpreting international sign: mapping the interpreter's profile

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## ABSTRACT

This is the first study mapping the profile of International Sign (IS) conference interpreters worldwide. Rather than a language, IS is a set of variable communicative practices used by deaf persons in international settings. In addition, international institutions and organisations increasingly offer IS interpreting services in order to provide accessibility. As IS is created through contact by deaf persons with various sign languages, IS is continuously changing and evolving. Because IS is not conventionalised, it requires highly specialised skills of the interpreter. At present there are only ad hoc training opportunities for IS conference interpreters and a new accreditation system has recently been put in place. This study presents questionnaire data from current IS interpreting practitioners, which provides insight into their present demographics and qualifications and which, in turn, can be used to inform educators on how to train future IS conference interpreters.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 2 January 2020  
Accepted 21 December 2020

## KEYWORDS

International sign; sign language; conference interpreting; interpreter training

## 1. Introduction

International Sign (henceforth IS) is a unique form of communication combining the most iconic and common elements of various sign languages.<sup>1</sup> Although IS is not a language, the characteristics and the use of IS have strong similarities to languages of low diffusion (LLD) in that it has few users and relatively few training resources. Furthermore, IS has no official status and is non-standardised, which are features it shares with some but not all LLDs (Balogh, Salaets, and Dominique 2016). Importantly, IS is created by users of sign languages in contact and can vary depending on the users and the setting (Quinto-Pozos and Adam 2015).

Interpreted IS typically occurs at global deaf <sup>2</sup> events to meet the needs of deaf conference participants that do not have interpreters working into their national sign language. IS interpreters render a mixed sign language system to a diverse sign language audience in the form of a unidirectional address. Mastering IS, and especially interpreting into IS, is considered a speciality, a skill that is not readily acquired (Whynot 2017). Apart from occasional ad hoc workshops, and a Master's programme that features an element of IS,<sup>3</sup> currently no formal systematic training of IS interpreters to work in conferences

and high-level meetings exists. Yet there is an increasing demand for IS conference interpreters and an apparent lack thereof (Wit and Sluis 2016). Compared to spoken language conference interpreting, professional signed language conference interpreting is in its infancy, specifically IS interpreting at conferences (Sheneman and Collins 2016; Wit and Sluis 2016). Although first steps have been made to accredit IS conference interpreters, there is an ongoing debate in the international interpreting and deaf communities what the required qualifications should be. To date, no comprehensive study has been undertaken of the IS interpreter's profile for interpreting at conferences in order to better understand the training and accreditation needs of this professional group. The aim of this article is to answer the following questions: what are the typical characteristics and qualifications of the IS conference interpreter, how did they acquire their skills, and what is the relevance for the training of IS conference interpreters?

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Conference interpreter training

For the relevance of the present study, conference settings are of specific interest, given that this seems to be the most common work setting for IS interpreters. The definition of conference interpreting, in general, is still under discussion (Wit 2020), but for the purpose of this article an adapted version (indicated by underlined text) of the International Association of Conference Interpreters' (AIIC) definition is used as published on the AIIC website: 'conference interpretation is conveying a message spoken or signed in one language into another. It is practised at international summits, professional seminars, and bilateral or multilateral meetings of heads of State and Government.'

The establishment of AIIC in 1953 has had a major impact on the development of the conference interpreting profession for spoken language interpreters, by shaping the professional standards and in its role as a trade union negotiating collective agreements with international institutions, such as the United Nations and the EU (Diriker 2015). As of 2012, sign language interpreters can become members of AIIC and more consideration is given to ensure equal working conditions for all, signed and spoken language, interpreters working in a team. Unlike for spoken language interpreters, programmes to train specifically to become a conference interpreter do not exist for signed language interpreters. The exception is the odd conference interpreting module in generic sign language interpreter training programmes. This lack of specialised training has had an effect on how signed language interpreting services are provided at conferences.

### 2.2. Accreditation of IS interpreters

International institutions, such as the EU and the UN, have accreditation tests in place for spoken language interpreters, but none for any national sign language or IS interpreters (Wit and Sluis 2016). As these institutions did not initiate or offer an accreditation test for sign language interpreters, formalised processes were needed to identify competent IS interpreters to work in these high-level meetings (Bontempo 2015). Consequently, the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) together with the World Association of Sign Language interpreters (WASLI) took the initiative and established a first accreditation

test for IS interpreters in 2015. This accreditation was a first step towards formalising the quality criteria of the IS conference interpreters and is still under review.

The accreditation procedure for IS interpreters was designed by a working group set-up by the WFD and WASLI and was informed by established practices of organisations such as AIIC. The first 20 IS interpreters, deaf and hearing, were accredited in 2015. The deaf interpreters interpret into IS from a visual input (via a hearing team interpreter who provides a relay in their common national sign language, or directly, via live written text<sup>4</sup>). The hearing interpreters typically interpret from a spoken language to IS and vice versa. This first cohort of interpreters was invited to apply for accreditation based on their experience working with the WFD and European Union of the Deaf (EUD) at the United Nations or in similar international settings (WFD, and WASLI 2016). According to the WFD-WASLI 2016 Handbook (WFD, and WASLI 2016), the applicants had to demonstrate the following essential skills and competencies:

- proficiency in IS, English, a national sign language, and national spoken and/or written language;
- 5 years of experience in interpreting at a national level in national signed and spoken languages;
- 3 years of experience in IS interpreting at international or regional events;
- co-working with other interpreters.

They also had to submit a portfolio and evidence of IS interpreting work, including letters of recommendation from interpreters who had worked with WFD or WASLI, from deaf consumers and national deaf associations or interpreting agencies.

Since 2015, as indicated on the WFD website, WFD-WASLI accreditation tests have been offered on an ad hoc basis, and now require applicants to provide samples of their IS interpreting work and take a live interpreting test conducted remotely. Thus far, WFD-WASLI accreditation has been obtained by only 30 IS interpreters. Not all interpreters listed are accredited by the EU and UN international institutions as they do not match the various institutional recruitment criteria, such as a requested language combination and a degree in interpreting (Duflou 2016). Consequently, institutional demand often cannot be met (Wit and Sluis 2016). There are also interpreters who work with IS but are not accredited by WFD-WASLI or the international institutions.

### **2.3. International sign (IS)**

Many individuals assume that IS is universally understood by signers (Mesch 2010). However, unlike Esperanto, IS is not a planned language (Hansen 2016; Iriye and Saunier 2009; Rosenstock 2004; Woll 1990), does not have a written nor a fixed form, and is typically acquired through interaction with signers who do not share a common sign language (Kusters 2020; Quinto-Pozos and Adam 2015; Rosenstock and Napier 2016; Whynot 2017).

IS is unique in that signers with different language backgrounds can use it to communicate across borders with relative ease (Quinto-Pozos and Adam 2015). The flexibility of IS allows interlocutors to construct a signed message with the use of iconic, grammatical and shared visual elements from different national sign

languages (WFD 2019; Woll and Adam 2012), and is often thought to be heavily influenced by American Sign Language and its variants used, for example, in some African countries (Kusters 2020). Iconicity is ubiquitous in signed languages and plays an important role, for instance, when the handshape of a sign visually represents the visual-spatial characteristics of a referent (Ortega 2017). Iconic signs are exploited even more in the production of IS. Although there is no fixed IS lexicon, some conventionalisation of signs has been noticed in recurring settings such as the WFD assembly and congress (Whynot 2017). Although the name suggests otherwise, there is no single form of IS. Rather, signers report on regional variations, such as Western-IS and an Asian-IS (Hansen 2016; Mori 2011). The IS studies to date mainly looked at settings with a strong presence of European and North American signers. As yet, no study has been published, for example, on how IS is used when deaf signers from various African or Middle Eastern countries meet during their international events. IS is seen by deaf communities as an easily accessible form of signing, which can be adapted by the users as a *lingua franca* (Kusters [forthcoming](#); Rosenstock and Napier 2016; Stone and Russell 2016; Whynot 2017). WFD published an online paper with frequently asked questions (WFD 2019), referring to IS as a translanguaging practice in which iconic structures are used along with the signs of more than one sign language (WFD 2019). De Meulder, Kusters, Moriarty and Murray. (2019) describe translanguaging as a dynamic language practice, in which people use multiple resources in their communication, such as signing, gesturing, writing and speaking.

IS is not widely diffused, as deaf people only use IS in international contexts when they do not share a sign language. In addition, only a select number of deaf people are exposed to the IS that is used at high-level international events as they do not have the means to participate in the live event or via the internet. IS is valued by international deaf communities because of its power in uniting deaf people across the globe, yet the use of IS is also highly debated (Mesch 2010; Moody 2002). The WFD represents the interest of 70 million deaf people worldwide, especially those who use a sign language, and views IS as a threat if hiring institutions and organisations regard it as a one-stop solution to provide access to an event, leaving the participants no choice but to use IS instead of their national sign language (WFD 2019). Since it is easier to process information in one's national sign language than in IS with its non-conventionalised lexicon, this solution can limit the participants' access to information (Mesch 2010). The WFD protects indigenous sign languages for the use of local, regional or national communities of those sign languages (WFD 2019). However, at international gatherings, the WFD encourages the use of IS as a form of direct communication between signers (Green 2014).

Interestingly, IS has different levels of use and understanding depending on the interlocutors, context and setting (Green 2015; Hiddinga and Crasborn 2011). For example, when deaf people meet at international sports events, there is a common understanding of the context and shared understanding in IS can be created relatively fast (McKee and Napier 2002). A meeting at the European Commission on a technically complex subject, however, would require more effort in creating shared understanding (Turner and Napier 2014; Wit and Sluis 2016).

## 2.4. Interpreting international sign

In the last 20 years, deaf communities have lobbied extensively for the recognition of national sign languages by their respective governments (Wheatley and Pabsch 2012; De Meulder, Murray, and McKee 2019). This push has been successful in many countries, in part, because of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). Article 9.2.e of the UNCRPD also specifically states the right to a professional sign language interpreter. As of 2018, all EU member states plus the European Union as a regional body have ratified the UNCRPD (De Meulder 2014; Wheatley and Pabsch 2012). This ratification has had major consequences for the profession of signed language interpreters, driving awareness and demand for interpreting services at (inter)national levels. In addition, globalisation has provided deaf persons with more opportunities to attend international events, either live or via the internet (Bontempo 2015; Hiddinga and Crasborn 2011; Turner and Napier 2014).

The few studies conducted on IS interpreting indicate that the production of IS is cognitively demanding, suggesting that interpreting IS is even more demanding than interpreting between a national signed and spoken language (Leeson 2005; Rosenstock and Napier 2016; Whynot 2017). Sign language interpreters who intend to work as IS interpreters face several challenges. Although there are multiple university-level programmes for national sign language interpreters, there is no systematic formal education to become an accredited IS interpreter (Wit 2016). More experienced IS interpreters have learned their skills by doing interpreting work (Turner and Napier 2014), but few sign language interpreters work exclusively as conference interpreters in any sign language, including IS (Napier, McKee, and Goswell 2018).

Thus, it is challenging to learn how to interpret IS, and, for prospective IS interpreters, IS is relatively new and most of the interpretation work is done via English, a non-native language for many (De Meulder, Napier, and Stone 2018; Wit 2010). To interpret IS, it is suggested that interpreters must have extensive experience in their own national sign language and know at least one additional national sign language, must have travelled and attended international deaf signing events and be closely involved with deaf communities (McKee and Napier 2002; Moody 2008), and have English language competencies (EUD [European Union of the Deaf] 2019). Mesch (2010) also implies that it is helpful to have a sign language as a native language. The concept of what defines this native language is not clear cut (Lu, Jones, and Morgan 2016), especially for deaf people who may not grow up with a sign language as their home language if they have hearing parents (Murray, Hall, and Snoddon 2020), who as ‘new signers’ may choose to acquire a sign language later in life (De Meulder 2019). Next to these basic pre-requisites, the IS interpreter needs to know how to construct an IS interpretation by creating a meaningful target message utilising a mix of multiple languages and very few conventionalised signs for audiences that might be less or more familiar with IS (Whynot 2017). This is different from interpreting into national sign languages which have established vocabularies and grammatical conventions. In all, current literature suggests that to interpret IS, the IS interpreter requires a set of interpreting skills that diverge from interpreting to and from national sign languages.

To sum up this overview, the limited research on IS interpreting suggests that to acquire IS interpreting skills, the candidate interpreter must have been exposed to or

know multiple national sign languages, should engage in international deaf signing events and invest in themselves professionally. As IS is only present in dedicated settings, one must make a conscious effort to immerse oneself in a multilingual sign language environment.

Although practice shows that sign language interpreters have learned conference interpreting by doing, it is evident that conference interpreters need specialised training to ensure they have the techniques to perform in high-level settings to deliver quality interpretation (Gile 2009). This lack of training is even more problematic for IS interpreters, as there is minimal training in conference interpreting, in IS or IS interpreting. To consider how to train IS conference interpreters, we first must understand their current work: where they are employed and which professional profile is a promising foundation for becoming an IS interpreter. The limited studies on IS interpreting to date provide very little information on sign language interpreters interpreting IS worldwide. This study aims to take a first step in addressing that gap.

### 3. Methodology

To map the profile of the interpreters that work with IS, a global survey was conducted. The survey questions emerged from the findings in the literature review and observations made during interpreting practice. The fundamental topics in the survey address the demographics, characteristics and skills of the IS interpreter, how the interpreters are educated and where they work. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the survey results. The ethics assessment committee of the Radboud University granted permission for this study as part of the larger project 'Deaf Communication without a Shared Language'.

The survey was first written in English, the *lingua franca* of sign language interpreters at international gatherings, and was consecutively vetted by five non-native English speakers via a think-out-loud-protocol (TAP) (Presser et al. 2004). The survey was tested for intelligibility, time needed to complete and potential technical or logistical errors (Krosnick and Presser 2010). The survey was then translated into IS as the targeted respondents of the survey are IS interpreters. In order to avoid any of the current accredited WFD-WASLI interpreters being influenced by familiarity of a colleague and minimising any misapprehension of competition, a deaf translator was hired. One of the researchers guided the translation process in the studio to ensure that the translation reflected the survey's intention and content.

#### 3.1. Building the survey

The online survey tool, *Survey Gizmo*, was used to allow for global participation. The survey consisted of a total of 36 multiple-choice and open-ended questions to collect qualitative as well as quantitative data (Creswell 2017; Hale and Napier 2014; Patten and Newhart 2017; Pöchhacker 2015). Each question was shown in English text and IS video. Possible answers were also shown in these formats. Respondents could then read English or view the video and respond to the question by selecting an answer or write in English their answer and comments. At the end of the survey, the respondent had the option to leave an overall comment in writing or upload a signed video. As the respondent was

expected to take approximately 15 to 20 minutes to fill out the survey, there was a reduced chance an unqualified respondent would fill it out because they would not take the needed time to answer all the questions to complete the survey (Krosnick and Presser 2010).

The survey only contained two questions with forced answers (Décieux et al. 2015), which allowed a logical trigger to show or skip the following questions. This was done so as not to frustrate the respondent in having to respond to questions that would not be applicable to their practice. In addition, the respondent received a soft reminder when he or she skipped a question (Décieux et al. 2015).

To reduce acquiescence (Krosnick and Presser 2010), which is likely to occur in the case of binary answer options, several questions used a five-point Likert scale. The answers did not include a NA (not applicable) or DK (do not know) as this type of answer could lead to dropout, poor quality or missing data (Décieux et al. 2015; De Leeuw, Hox, and Boevé 2016).

By submitting their answers, the participants gave permission for the researchers to use the survey data. Even though the responses were collected anonymously, the respondents were informed that given the small number of interpreters working with IS it might be apparent from the data who they were.

### **3.2. Distribution of the survey**

The call to participate in the survey was distributed via a snowball method, which can be used effectively in interpreting studies (Hale and Napier 2014) using existing social media channels (Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn) and one of the researchers' personal website and mailing list (with 891 individual subscriptions). On this website, a brief explanation of the call to participate in the survey was published in the languages that were available to the researchers: English, German, French, Spanish (two varieties: Spain and Americas), Italian, Portuguese, Greek and IS.

Twenty-nine of the thirty then (March 2019) available interpreters accredited by WFD and WASLI received a direct and personal request to participate in the survey. Additionally, 27 interpreters that are not accredited but are known to the researchers to interpret IS also received a personal direct email request. One week before the deadline of the survey, reminders were sent out to these possible participants and published on social media channels.

The organisations representing sign language interpreters at an international level, the European Forum of Sign Language Interpreters (EFSLI) and WASLI helped to distribute the call to their members via email. The WFD and the EUD were also informed of the distribution of the global survey. The survey was open during the entire month of April 2019 and the deadline was extended for an additional 2 weeks to allow late respondents to still participate.

## **4. Results**

The first survey question ensured that the respondent had the suitable profile for the aim of the survey, namely those interpreters who actually work, either occasionally or regularly,



with IS. Any interpreter working with IS could respond, irrespective of the WFD-WASLI accreditation or another self-labelled status. The results of the survey are presented below.

#### 4.1. Demographics

A total of 108 interpreters responded to the survey stating that they interpret regularly or sometimes in IS ( $N=108$ ). Their demographics are shown in Table 1. Eighteen of the 108 respondents do not work as IS interpreters in conference settings, and the majority of these 18 do not regularly work with IS. They work with IS mostly in travel and tourism, community, refugee and immigration, educational settings for private companies, at a specific event (Deaf Way) or for a specific organisation (national deaf institute). This article focuses on the 90 IS interpreters who work in conference settings.

#### 4.2. Characteristics of the conference IS interpreters

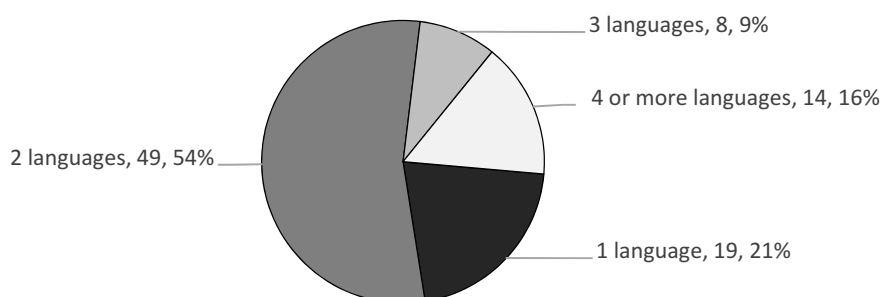
This section provides an outline of the characteristics of the present IS conference interpreters ( $N=90$ ) including demographics, languages used, acquisition of IS and training and work settings. Table 1 offers an overview of their demographics. The majority of the respondents are between 35 and 44 years old and mostly from Europe and North America. The respondents self-identified as deaf, hearing or hard of hearing.

Based on the literature review, the survey focused on gaining further insights regarding language background and interpreting experience of the practitioners. As there is a discussion about whether auditory status (deaf or hearing) is relevant for the IS interpreting profession, selected segregated data will be presented as well.

Figure 1 shows that nearly 80% grew up with two or more languages. Of the total 71% (64) grew up with a signed language and 29% (26) did not. Nearly half (44; 49%) had English as one of their languages used before the age of 12 and 51% (46) did not. Of those who did not grow up with a signed language (26), there were 14 (54%) that had one language growing up and 12 (46%) that had two or more languages. The majority (17;

**Table 1.** Demographics of all respondents and IS interpreters ( $N=108$ ).

	All respondents ( $N=108$ )		IS interpreters working at conferences ( $N=90$ )	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Male	49	45.4%	46	51.1%
Female	57	52.8%	42	46.7%
Prefers not to disclose gender/other	2	1.8%	2	2.2%
Deaf	48	44.4%	44	48.9%
Hearing	58	53.7%	44	48.9%
Hard of hearing	2	1.9%	2	2.2%
Age – average	37.3		37.8	
<i>Based in:</i>				
Europe	78	72.2%	63	70%
North America	16	14.8%	14	15.6%
Australia/Oceania	5	4.6%	5	5.6%
Asia	5	4.6%	4	4.4%
Africa	3	2.8%	3	3.3%
South & Central America based	1	0.9%	1	1.1%
WFD-WASLI accredited	26	24.1%	26	28.9%



**Figure 1.** Number of interpreters according to how many languages they grew up with ( $N=90$ ).

65%) of non-native signers had English as one of their native languages. Overall, only nine (10%) did not grow up with English before the age of 12 and are also non-native signers. Of these nine, five identified as hearing and four deaf.

The top five languages the respondents grew up with were English (45; 50%), American Sign Language (ASL) (14; 15.6%), French (11; 12.2%), German (10; 11.1%) and Dutch (9; 10%). When only looking at sign languages: fourteen interpreters (15.6%) acquired ASL growing up, British Sign Language (BSL) and Sign Language of the Netherlands (NGT) each with seven (7.8%), German Sign Language (DGS) with six (6.7%) and five (5.6%) reporting Australian Sign Language (Auslan).

### 4.3. Interpreter training

Seventy-five (83.3%) respondents completed an interpreter training programme and fifteen (16.7%) did not. Of those who did not receive any formal training, ten are deaf and five are hearing. Half of the deaf interpreters' report that the interpreter training programme in their country is not accessible for deaf students, while other deaf interpreters report that they do not see the need to attend training programmes as they are native signers. The reason for the hearing interpreters not to have attended a formal training programme is that when they started interpreting, 18 or more years ago, there was no programme available or they could not afford to pay its fees.

The highest interpreting-related degree reported is a PhD, others have a postgraduate, MA, a BA or an AA/AAS degree. There are also those who attended short courses and vocational training, which did not result in an interpreting degree. All of the reported educational programmes were general signed language interpreter programmes, without any specialisation such as in legal or conference interpreting.

### 4.4. Learning international sign

Figure 2 gives a total overview of how the interpreters learned IS. In addition to the given multiple-choice answers, the respondents commented that they also learned IS by having an active role (such as volunteering, chaperoning), other than interpreting, in events where IS was used, such as the WFD assembly or the Deaflympics. Others said that they

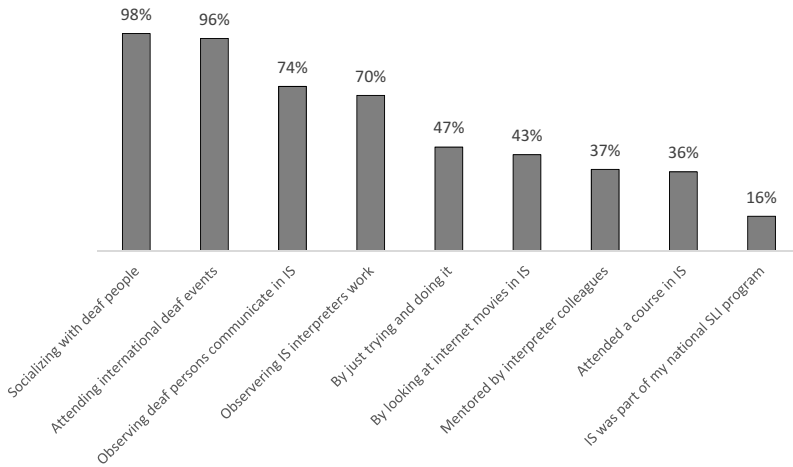


Figure 2. The ways in which IS conference interpreters learned IS (N= 90).

were exposed to IS and other sign languages living in other countries or having international visitors signing IS in their home.

Looking at the breakdown of experience in interpreting in IS, the 90 respondents can be roughly split in half. There is one group with more than 10 years of experience in IS interpreting (46) and a second group with 9 years or less experience who learned IS more recently (44). Both groups name the same top four means of learning IS (Figure 2), but one major difference can be observed: the less experienced group mention watching IS on the internet as their fifth way of learning IS, followed by IS as part of the curriculum in their sign language interpreter training.

Not much difference between deaf or hearing respondents can be found in learning IS, with a few exceptions (Figure 3). More deaf than hearing interpreters report that IS was part of their sign language interpreter curriculum. Considerably more hearing interpreters indicate that they learned IS by just trying to interpret than deaf interpreters.

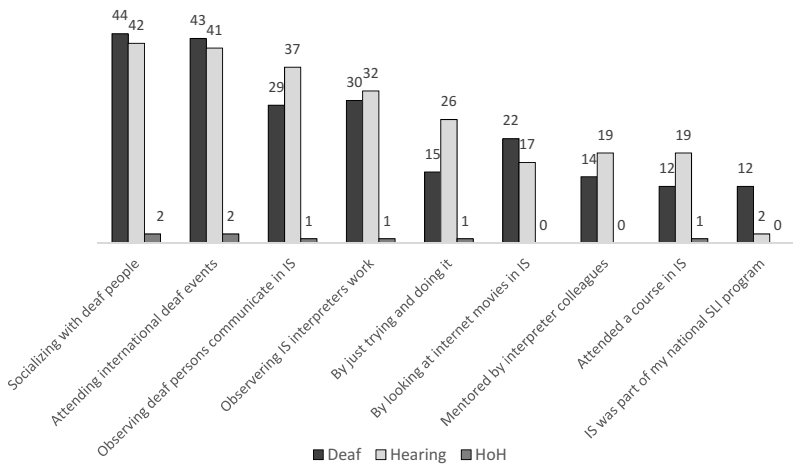


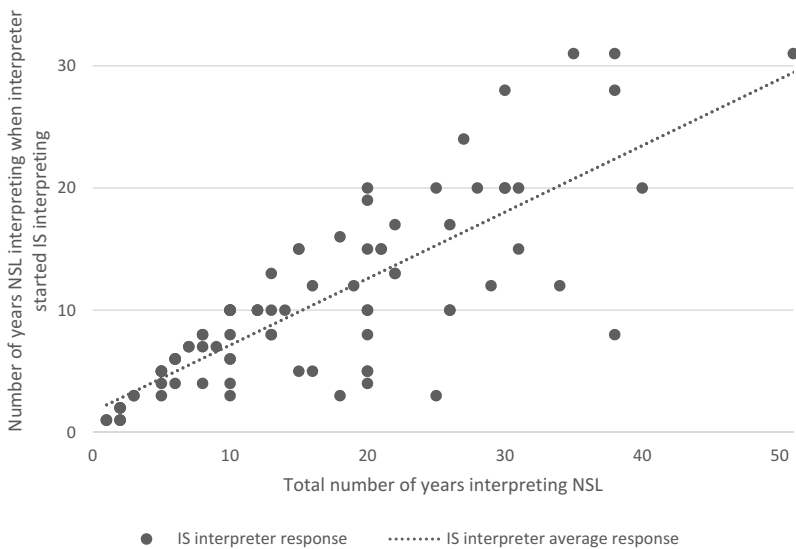
Figure 3. Ways of learning IS (deaf, hearing, hard of hearing) (N= 90).

#### 4.5. Working as an IS conference interpreter

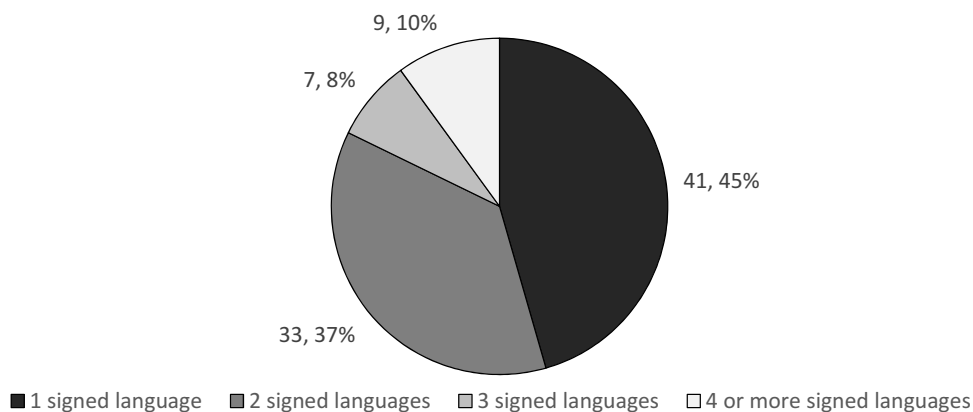
The respondents started working with IS for various reasons, most frequently because the opportunity came along and the interpreter decided to give it a try ( $n = 54$ ). Others report that deaf people encouraged them ( $n = 50$ ), by volunteering to interpret IS ( $n = 48$ ) and because interpreter colleagues encouraged them ( $n = 38$ ). Additionally, the situation they were in brought along the opportunity, such as their workplace or an internship. Only a few interpreters ( $n = 8$ ) actually planned to become an IS interpreter and worked towards achieving that goal.

The average number of years the conference IS interpreters ( $N = 90$ ) have worked as a signed language interpreter is 15.2 ( $SD = 10.2$ ; range 1–50 years). The respondents have worked as an IS interpreter an average of 9.6 ( $SD = 6.3$ ) years. There are 30 respondents who indicate that they have an equal number of years of experience in interpreting their national sign language as in IS interpreting. This means that they started interpreting their national sign language and IS at about the same time. It is noticeable that nearly all of those who have more than 15 years of experience interpreting in their national sign language started interpreting IS on average after 10 years ( $n = 39$ ). This is a marked difference compared to those who have less than 15 years of experience in interpreting their national sign language, who started on average after 1.39 years of interpreting their national sign language ( $n = 51$ ). People who started interpreting IS in the last 5 years ( $n = 28$ ) started even earlier, namely 2.5 months after they started working as a national sign language (NSL) interpreter (Figure 4).

The IS interpreters work with a variety of regional and national sign languages ( $M = 1.86$ ,  $SD = 1.06$ ; range 1–6). The sign languages that interpreters mostly work with are ASL (45.6%), BSL (24.4%), Auslan (12.2%), NGT (11.1%) and DGS (8.9%). More than half (55%) work with two or more sign languages and the rest work with one



**Figure 4.** Years of experience interpreting NSL (X-axis) compared to the number of years after which an interpreter started IS interpreting (Y-axis).



**Figure 5.** Number of IS conference interpreters and the number of sign languages they work with ( $N=90$ ).

national sign language. **Figure 5** gives an overview of the number of interpreters and how many signed languages they work with.

Deaf and hard of hearing interpreters work on average with more national sign languages than hearing interpreters. One hard of hearing and eighteen deaf interpreters work with one national sign language and the remaining twenty-eight work with two or more national sign languages. There are 23 hearing sign language interpreters who work with one national sign language and 21 with two or more national sign languages. With the exception of two interpreters, twenty-six WFD-WASLI accredited interpreters work with a sign language that is used in an English-speaking country (Auslan, BSL, ASL, ISL<sup>5</sup>).

The language combinations the vast majority of the 90 interpreters work in is between IS and their national sign language (76; 84%). The interpreters who are deaf ( $n = 44$ ) mostly work between their national sign language and IS and vice versa. Among hearing interpreters, 41 (93%) state that their typical combination is between English and IS, most often working from English to IS.

Europe is the continent where most of the IS conference interpreters work, even though they might be based on another continent (**Figure 6**). Some respondents indicate that there is not a single continent where they work the most.

In 2018 the majority of the interpreters interpreted one to ten days ( $n = 44$ ), followed by eleven to fifty days ( $n = 31$ ) (**Figure 7**).

**Figure 8** compares the number of days deaf and hearing interpreters work. Fewer than half of all the respondents ( $n = 42$ ) are satisfied with the number of days they worked in 2018. Those who are not satisfied ( $n = 47$ ) gave various reasons for this. For example, where they live brings few opportunities for IS work or practice and as a consequence, they cannot adequately develop their skills: ‘I do not possess the traits of a traveling interpreter – I do not have the luxury to accept IS jobs outside of my region, so I get a very limited quantity of IS assignments.’

Respondents also mention that it is not easy to get IS interpreting opportunities where they live and as a consequence not being able to meet the requirement of the number of

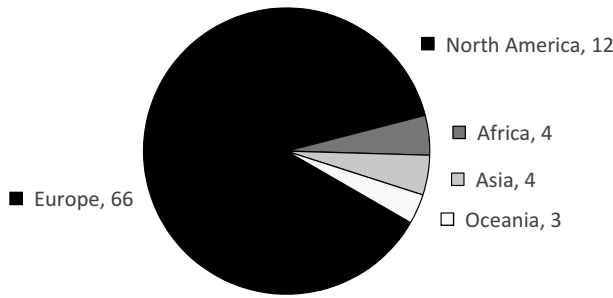


Figure 6. Continents on which IS conference interpreters mostly work (N= 89).

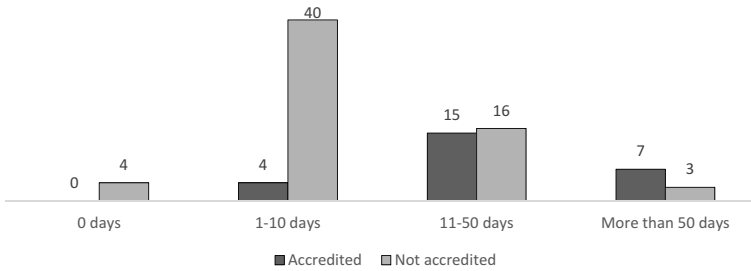


Figure 7. Number of conference days worked with IS, WFD-WASLI accredited interpreters vs. not accredited (N= 89).

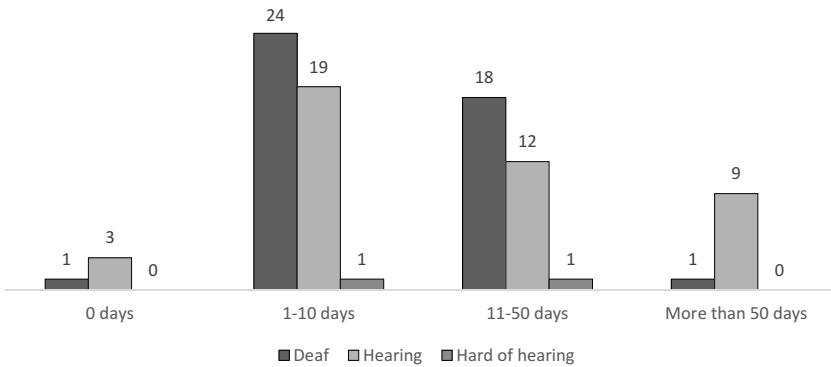
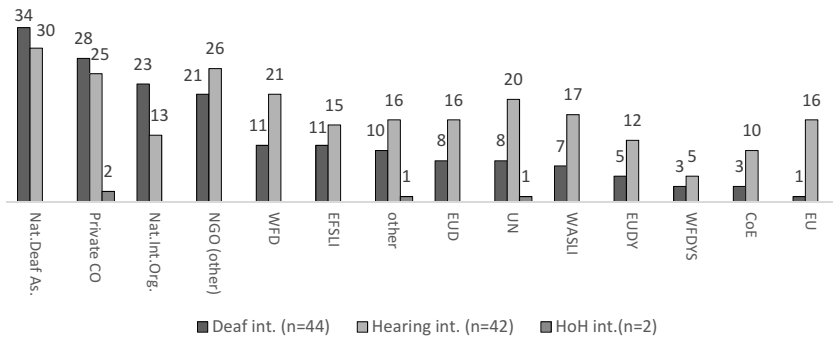


Figure 8. Number of conference days worked with IS (N= 89).

IS interpreting hours for the WFD-WASLI IS interpreter accreditation: ‘The number of hours of IS interpreting required is difficult to attain outside of Europe.’<sup>6</sup>

Others mention issues such as the timeliness of the interpretation requests and that there is very little awareness of how deaf interpreters work. Specifically, deaf interpreters (n = 27) state that hearing interpreters take all the jobs and many contracting parties are uninformed of how deaf interpreters can work via a relay: ‘Hearing interpreters being gatekeepers, keeping the gate shut for the deaf IS interpreters.’



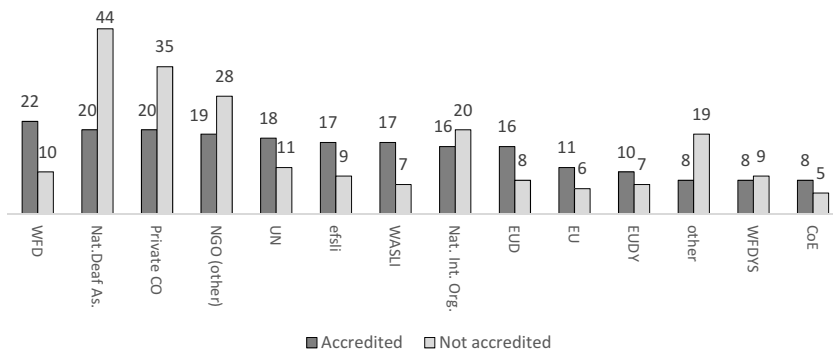
**Figure 9.** IS conference interpreters (N= 88) and the organisations they work for.

Some respondents say that due to this lack of awareness or the potential additional costs, hiring parties refrain from hiring deaf interpreters: ‘Deaf interpreters are rarely used generally due to ignorance about how they work.’

Overall, the respondents say that as conference IS interpreters they mostly work for national organisations of the deaf, private companies, other NGOs (not interpreting or deaf related) and national interpreter organisations.

Figure 9 indicates the organisations the IS interpreters work for categorised by deaf, hearing or hard of hearing interpreters. The category ‘other’, encompasses international sports and deafblind organisations, universities, immigration services, governmental agencies and regional sign language interpreting events.

The 26 interpreters accredited by WFD and WASLI mostly work for all the named organisations, such as the WFD, WASLI and the United Nations, with the exception of World Federation of Deaf Youth Section (WFDYS) (Figure 10). There is a substantial number of non-accredited interpreters working for national associations of the deaf, private companies and NGOs. Some non-accredited interpreters mention they would consider applying to WFD-WASLI for accreditation, as they see it as a professional standard and recognition of their skills. There are others who are not eager to apply, due



**Figure 10.** IS accredited and not accredited conference interpreters (N= 88) and the organisations they work for.

to a lack of opportunity to practice IS interpreting, low confidence and little experience. A further detailed exploration of the WFD-WASLI accreditation goes beyond the scope of this article.

## 5. Discussion

The survey results give an insight into the profile of IS conference interpreters. From the 90 surveyed interpreters, all indicate that they work with IS in conference settings, but none of them has been trained to do so. Two different groups can be identified: the very experienced IS interpreters (15 years or more) with an average of 10 years' experience in their NSL before starting to interpret IS, and the lesser experienced who started IS interpreting after less than 1.5 years NSL interpreting. Although only 26 of the 90 respondents are accredited by WFD-WASLI, this accreditation system is mentioned by many respondents as their reference for IS interpreter qualifications. The non-accredited interpreters note that it is difficult to gain the experience and exposure to become equally qualified as those that are accredited. The international deaf and interpreter organisations and international institutions typically work with accredited interpreters. The non-accredited interpreters mostly work for other NGOs, their national associations of the deaf and private companies.

As was noted in the introduction, institutions and contracting parties urge for more IS interpreters as they experience a lack of them. Regardless of where IS interpreters are based, the majority of the IS conference interpreting work is reported to be in Europe. This could be explained by the linguistic diversity, the international cooperation of the national deaf organisations in the EU and the relatively high number of international institutions in Europe. At the same time, almost half of the 90 respondents who work as conference IS interpreters indicate that they would like to have worked more with IS in 2018. This is especially true for deaf interpreters even though, on average, they report more IS working days than their hearing colleagues. They attribute their shortage of working days to their language combinations. Since they do not work directly between English and IS but work via a relay, this often doubles the cost for hiring parties. These interpreters' dissatisfaction could also be caused by the higher visibility of hearing interpreters, typically at web-streamed events. As to the hearing interpreters who are not happy with their number of working days, they mainly reason that this is due to the scarce opportunities of IS work and practicing IS interpreting.

The study also demonstrates that growing up bilingually with a signed language and knowing more than one national sign language appears to be a requirement for IS interpreting skills. English is the dominant common language these interpreters grew up with. English is also the language the hearing IS interpreters work with most frequently in combination with IS. Deaf interpreters typically work between a national sign language and IS. There are very few IS interpreters who did not grow up with English, a signed language, or both, suggesting that these are important pre-requisites to work as an IS interpreter. English likely is so prominent simply because English is widely used in conference settings where interpreters work.

There is an apparent lack of training of conference IS interpreters. The majority of the IS interpreters surveyed did attend a sign language interpreter training programme but learned IS in practice, confirming earlier research. Rather than through formal teaching,



IS is mostly acquired by socialising with deaf persons with various sign languages, attending international deaf events and observing working IS interpreters and deaf signers communicating in IS. Watching IS on the internet is specifically used by the younger group of IS interpreters as a way to learn the technique (see also [mobiledeaf.org](http://mobiledeaf.org) for a similar finding). Overall, specific education in IS conference interpreting techniques is lacking and there is a great gap between those with extensive experience working at international institutions and those who would like to become more experienced. Formal training of IS conference interpreters would provide a systematic opportunity for skills acquisition to enlarge the pool of IS interpreters to meet the increasing demand.

## 6. Limitations

As this is the first study mapping the work of IS interpreters worldwide, there is no baseline measurement with which to compare the outcomes of this survey. It must be noted that since this was an online survey, those who did not have access to the internet were unable to participate. Although the call for participation in the survey was promoted in seven different written European languages and IS, the full survey was presented in IS and English which may have been a language barrier for some. While various attempts were made to reach the known IS interpreters in Latin America and Africa via regional WASLI representatives, only a few interpreters from these areas participated. The relatively large number of Dutch participants can be explained by the familiarity of the first author with IS interpreters in the Netherlands who might not advertise publicly that they interpret IS.

## 7. Conclusion

This study gives a first overview of the sign language interpreters worldwide who work with IS. It shows the profile of current IS interpreters, how they learned IS and how they eventually became IS interpreters. We recommend that this survey should be repeated when the Covid-19 pandemic is over in order to evaluate how the IS interpreter's profile has shifted, particularly in relation to the prevalence of IS interpreting online, and whether interpreters from different parts of the world are able to access more work as a result.

The results can be used to inform a formal training of IS interpreters, which is urgently needed. When working as an IS interpreter, knowing multiple languages is essential, especially English. For IS interpreters, either knowing more than one national sign language or being exposed to several signed languages and attending international deaf signing events is key. This exposure will build the interpreter's sign language lexicon with a variety of sign languages that is needed to create an IS interpretation and should thus form an important part of an education. The findings also suggest that online materials may yield additional learning opportunities.

As the findings of this study are informed mostly by interpreters who developed skills 'on the job', a further critical review should be carried out by trainers and users of IS interpreting services to assess whether these observed qualities and practices found in the survey are relevant and if so, how they can be used to develop a training for IS conference interpreters.

Since the WFD-WASLI accreditation system is relatively new, the above observations might also be helpful in reviewing the current accreditation process. Because visibility of IS increases through interpreted events and web streaming, we might expect an expansion of a more conventionalised IS lexicon, which in turn will have consequences for the training of IS interpreters. Finally, the increasing recording and publishing of web-streamed interpretation demands additional interpreting techniques. Consequently, this also calls for further research on how to train conference IS interpreters for web streaming purposes. Overall this study has shown that even though IS is not defined as a language per se, there are many parallels to challenges common to LLD, specifically with regard to educating aspiring IS conference interpreters. Even though IS is not widely diffused and only used in specific settings, IS interpreting is ubiquitous as the main signed language interpretation service at international conferences. As with all conference language interpretation, participants should be ensured high-quality IS interpretation, which is only possible if IS conference interpreters are educated through rigorous training programmes.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Notes

1. In this article ‘sign language’ is used to refer to a national sign language and ‘signed language’ is used to refer to the modality of the language and in contrast with spoken language.
2. In this article lowercase ‘deaf’ is used to refer to any deaf person regardless of community or cultural affinity.
3. <https://www.eumasli.eu>
4. Also referred to as speech to text, velotyping, or CART.
5. Irish Sign Language.
6. This survey was obviously conducted prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, so we recognise that this data should be viewed in that context as many more IS interpreters are now working online and there are less restrictions on the countries in which they work.

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