

Telephone interpreting — seen from the interpreters' perspective

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Telephone interpreting has been used widely in various community interpreting settings, but it has received little attention as a distinct area of interpreting in the growing body of interpreting studies. As telephone interpreting is being promoted for its convenience and for the greater availability of interpreters, this paper examines the perspective of telephone interpreters on their professional activity. Based on telephone surveys with Korean interpreters working in Australia, this paper investigates the profiles of the telephone interpreters in terms of age, gender, years of working experience, and employment type, as well as their professional practice and their opinions about telephone interpreting and the role of telephone interpreters.

Keywords: telephone interpreting, profession, remuneration, role, Korean

Introduction

Telephone interpreting refers to situations in which the interpreter works over the telephone, without seeing one or either of the two primary parties in the communicative event. The interpreter may be physically present in the same venue as one of the two parties, may be located at one venue while the two primary parties are in the same one, or else each of the three parties, including the interpreter, may be at a separate location. Telephone interpreting in this paper is closely linked with community interpreting in general, which serves to assist immigrants and other language minorities in their access to the services provided by the host countries (Kalina 2002: 172).

In Australia, a telephone interpreting service was set up by the Commonwealth Government of Australia in 1973 in order to meet the communication needs of immigrants from non-English speaking backgrounds (Chesher 1997: 283). It was a 24-hour telephone interpreting service called the Emergency Telephone

Interpreter Service (now Translating and Interpreting Service — TIS). The exact volume of telephone interpreting in Australia is not known because figures are not readily available, but there are indications that the popularity of telephone interpreting has risen. According to the latest official statistics provided by the Commonwealth Government, telephone interpreting accounted for 55% of all interpreting services provided by TIS in 2001–2002, and there was an increase of 10% over the previous year in terms of the number of interpreted calls (DIMA 2003: 282–283). TIS is a major government agency, funded by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (formerly known as DIMA), and offers nationwide telephone service in around 100 languages and dialects (Chesher 1997: 283). Telephone interpreting service in terms of minutes delivered by TIS has also increased over the years (Ozolins 2002: 281), which may be attributable to the cost-effectiveness and the greater availability of telephone interpreters.

The prominence of telephone interpreting in community interpreting can also be inferred from Chesher et al.'s (2003) survey of community interpreters in several countries. They note that “an equal proportion of interpreting occurs on site and over the phone in community interpreting” (2003: 283). Despite its prevalence and relatively long existence in the realm of community interpreting, there has been a dearth of literature on this mode of interpreting as a distinct area of research, perhaps due to an assumption that it is no different from on-site interpreting. This may be why training or orientation expressly designed for telephone interpreting is uncommon. However, telephone interpreting may not be as simple and easy as it sounds. Telephone interpreters often work in isolation from the other parties, and have to interpret without seeing their interlocutors, relying solely on audio input. They may not have advance information on such matters as the nature of the discussions and the length of the task.

Discourse-based studies of telephone interpreting

Some of the unique features of telephone interpreting have been described by Oviatt and Cohen (1992), who examined the discourse of telephone interpreting in service-oriented encounters, while Wadensjö (1999) studied it in comparison with face-to-face interpreting.

With a view to developing an automatic telephone interpretation system, Oviatt and Cohen (1992) analysed service-oriented telephone conversations about conference registration and travel information between a Japanese conference registrar and English speakers, mediated by three skilled Japanese-English telephone interpreters, who were oriented to the tasks they would be handling and were given an opportunity to practice before the experiment. Oviatt and Cohen examined the

unique characteristics of interpreted telephone dialogues by comparing them with the same number of non-interpreted calls, and noted that telephone interpreters managed information and took considerable initiative in turn management and organising the flow of the dialogue (1992: 285–286). The transcription reveals that, even when the Japanese speaker did not speak, the interpreter engaged in conversation with the English speaker and asked for basic information, such as full name and spelling, fax number, etc. This can be considered a departure from the norm in interpreting practice, but Oviatt and Cohen suggest that the telephone interpreter was assuming an independent agent's role to achieve the goal of communication.

These experienced Japanese telephone interpreters mixed first person and third person in a consistent manner. In the sub-dialogues between the interpreter and an English speaker, and between the interpreter and the Japanese conference registrar, the interpreters used first-person pronouns to assert themselves and third-person pronouns in reference to the person waiting on the other line, who was not engaged in the ongoing sub-dialogue. According to Oviatt and Cohen (1992: 286), the use of third-person references became more evident as the interpreters became more familiar with the domain they were handling. This explicit referential system supports the finding that the interpreters adopt an additional role in order to efficiently complete the service exchange over the phone and prevent confusion about who is speaking, by managing the multiparty telephone conversations.

In other words, the telephone interpreters use indirect speech to convey the message of the original speaker across languages. It is not certain whether the Japanese interpreters were professionally trained or natural interpreters, but the mixed use of first- and third-person interpreting is noteworthy. In the interpreting industry and in interpreter education, first-person interpreting is regarded as a professional norm, to the extent that interpreting in the third person is regarded as evidence of a lack of professionalism (Bot 2005). The role of telephone interpreters and the choice of person in interpreting has not received much attention in the IS literature, and the lacuna is all the more conspicuous since role boundaries appear to be different in various telephone interpreting settings, such as this kind of service exchange.

Whereas the study by Oviatt and Cohen (1992) was experimental, Wadensjö (1999) analysed discourse in real situations, in which a Swedish interpreter interpreted for a Russian-speaking victim during a police interview. Her study provides useful information on the nature of telephone-interpreted vs. on-site interpreted discourse: two interviews, matched in all respects but this one, showed the telephone-mediated mode to be less smooth and to be associated with lower tolerance of overlapping speech. Non-verbal communication also posed a challenge in telephone interpreting, as additional information about non-verbal communication had to be provided by the police officer because the interpreter could

not see the interaction between the police officer and the victim, both of whom were elsewhere, at the police station. When this non-verbal communication was being provided, the flow of talk was interrupted, and the interpreter had a problem interpreting and coordinating the interaction.

These findings suggest that telephone interpreting may not work in all settings or for all interpreters, which is supported by Wadensjö's interview with the injured victim and the interpreter. The victim reported difficulty in talking when the interpreter was on the telephone (Wadensjö 1999: 254), and the interpreter stated that she chose not to provide telephone interpreting in stressful situations, such as psychiatric sessions and situations involving traumatised refugees, for fear of greater burnout (1999: 250). There was no mention of third-person interpreting in Wadensjö's study. The limited discourse in the transcript revealed only one occasion, which occurred when the police officer explained non-verbal information to the telephone interpreter by referring to the victim as 'she'. All the other questions were addressed to the victim directly, using the second-person pronoun.

Both Oviatt and Cohen (1992) and Wadensjö (1999) draw our attention to the fact that telephone interpreters assume the additional role of coordinating interactions over the phone, but there is no across-the-board agreement on the role of the interpreter in a wide range of interpreting settings. Broadly speaking, there are two models: At one extreme, there is the conduit metaphor, with the interpreter seen as a mechanical device whose role is limited to transferring the message. This view focuses on the linguistic aspects of communication. At the other end, the role of the interpreter is seen as that of a mediator or facilitator of communication between parties from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds to achieve a specific communication goal (Beltran-Avery 2001: 7). Most interpreters aim to strike a balance somewhere between these two extremes.

There has been increasing recognition that an interpreter is an active party in the communicative interactions, rather than a mere conduit (e.g. Roy 2000; Wadensjö 1998). The present study aims to advance the discussion contributing to the definition of the telephone interpreters' role. Three areas will be examined: first, a profile of telephone interpreters, including accreditation, gender, age, experience and type of employment; second, the professional practice, namely the amount and source of telephone interpreting work, as a proportion of overall work; and finally, the interpreters' views on the attractions and challenges of their work and on telephone interpreting as a profession, and their perception of the role of telephone interpreters in Australian community interpreting settings.

The study

The present study is based on oral reports by Korean telephone interpreters in Australia, which were obtained through telephone surveys. Forty-seven Korean interpreters were identified from the National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (NAATI) practitioners' directory (www.naati.com.au), which provides basic information on the interpreter's name, accreditation level and contact details. There are four levels for interpreting in the NAATI accreditation system: Paraprofessional Interpreter (PPI), Professional Interpreter (PI), Conference Interpreter, and Senior Conference Interpreter. The following excerpt from the NAATI website indicates the competence to be demonstrated by each accreditation level:

Paraprofessional Interpreter is considered to have competence in interpreting general conversations whereas Professional Interpreter, which is the first professional level, is capable of interpreting across a wide range of subjects including specialist consultations. By comparison, Conference Interpreter is the advanced professional level and represents competence to handle complex, technical and sophisticated interpreting both in consecutive and simultaneous mode in diverse situations (NAATI 2006).

Invitations were sent to all Korean interpreters listed in the NAATI practitioners' directory, and twenty-nine agreed to participate. The survey showed that twenty interpreters — referred to here as “telephone interpreters” — are currently active to varying degrees.

A semi-structured telephone interview method was chosen (see Appendix). The interviews were scheduled at individual interpreters' convenience, and were held over a period of 15 days from late September to early October 2006. Interviews were limited to about 15 minutes, in consideration of the interpreters' busy schedules, and possible loss of income. Responses were noted on survey sheets and later coded for analysis. Some responses, including those related to the profile of interpreters, frequency of telephone interpreting and remuneration, were suitable for quantitative analysis (using Excel), while responses to the open-ended questions (e.g. views on telephone interpreting) required qualitative analysis.

Results

The profile of Korean telephone interpreters

The profiles of the twenty telephone interpreters were analysed in terms of accreditation, gender, age, experience and employment type.

Accreditation level

Forty-five percent of the participants were Professional Interpreters (PIs) and 55% were Paraprofessional Interpreters (PPIs). None had accreditation as Conference Interpreters. 67% of PPIs and 90% of the PIs who agreed to participate provided telephone interpreting services. The high percentage of involvement by the latter seems to be related to their high ratio of full-time interpreting employment.

Gender and age

The telephone interpreters who participated in the survey were predominantly female (85% female and 15% male).

The largest group of telephone interpreters were in their thirties (45%), followed by those in their forties (25%), fifties (15%), twenties (10%) and sixties (5%) (see Table 1).

Table 1. Age groups

Age group	Telephone interpreters
20s	10%
30s	45%
40s	25%
50s	15%
60s	5%

Years of working experience

The largest group — 45% of the telephone interpreters — had a working experience of 1–5 years, and 15% of them had worked as interpreters for less than a year. 5% had been interpreting for over 20 years, and 10% (i.e. 2 interpreters, both of them PPIs) had just started interpreting a few days before the interview took place. Except for these two new interpreters, all the participants had also worked on-site (see Table 2).

Table 2. Working experience

Working experience	Telephone interpreters
Under 1 year	15%
1–5 years	45%
6–10 years	25%
11–15 years	10%
16–20 years	0%
Over 20 years	5%

Employment

In this paper, the term “full-time” employment refers to availability or engagement in both on-site and telephone interpreting, five days a week, as either in-house interpreters, agency contract interpreters or freelancers. The term “casual” employment is distinguished from “part-time” on the basis of whether or not the interpreter engages in other professional activities besides interpreting. The survey revealed that half of the telephone interpreters worked on a casual basis, which may be largely related to the untenable professional status of community interpreting and to the size of the industry. It is impossible to know whether this figure is representative of the larger population of telephone interpreters, but it is comparable to the findings of Chesher et al. (2003), who found that 43% of the community interpreters in their study worked only occasionally and only 21% worked full time (2003: 282). The findings in this study indicate that 25% worked face-to-face and over the phone on a full-time basis, while another 25% worked on a part-time basis.

When the employment type of telephone interpreters is viewed in relation to their accreditation level, an obvious difference is apparent (see Figure 1): 44% of professionals (PIs) worked on a full-time basis and 22% on a casual basis. In the case of the PPIs, on the other hand, the situation was reversed: only 9% worked full time and 73% on a casual basis.

However, even among full-time interpreters, none provided only telephone interpreting services, or interpreted over the telephone full time. Moreover, all of the telephone interpreters had an affiliation with at least one telephone interpreting agency.

Professional activity

Telephone interpreting: Frequency and proportion of overall work

When asked about the frequency of telephone interpreting and its share of their work, 60% of the telephone interpreters replied that they frequently worked over the telephone, namely at least a few times a day or a week, while 30% replied that they worked only a few times a year (see Figure 2).

For most of those questioned, interpreting over the telephone did not account for the bulk of their interpreting work. Fifty percent replied that telephone interpreting work comprised at least half of their assignments (see Figure 3), whereas 45% said it accounted for less than 10% and that their primary mode of work was face-to-face interpreting. As many as 26% said telephone interpreting accounted for only about 1% of their interpreting work; for them, the label “telephone

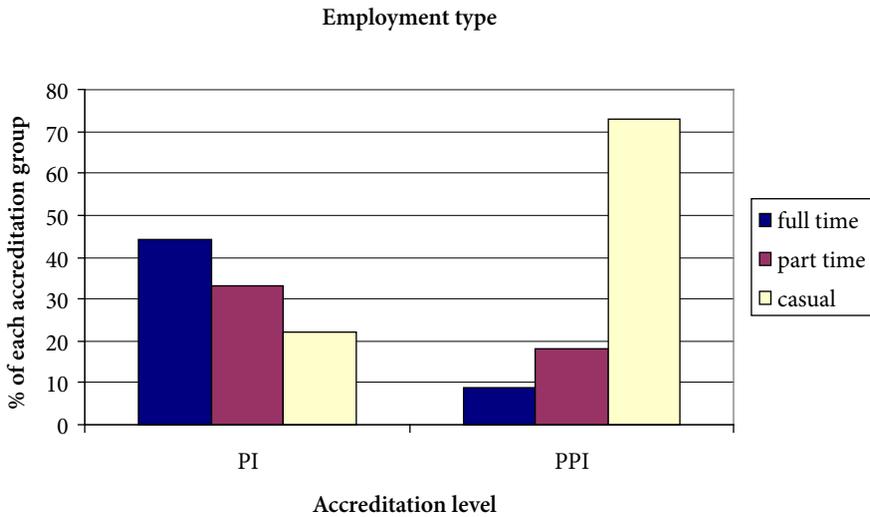


Figure 1. Employment type in relation to accreditation level

interpreter” may be a bit of a misnomer. Only 15% of the participants reported working roughly the same amount over the telephone and face-to-face, and about one quarter indicated that over-the-phone work accounted for 80% of their interpreting. Only a single interpreter spoke of telephone interpreting as his principal type of assignment, with over 90% of his interpreting assignments done over the phone, perhaps due to his location in South Australia, which has a relatively small Korean population compared with other states, such as New South Wales and Victoria.

Sources of telephone interpreting work

When asked how they received telephone interpreting work, telephone interpreters reported that their most common source was agencies, either government or private. A government agency, Centrelink, accounted for the largest share among government-funded agencies, followed by TIS and the Health Care Interpreter Service (HCIS). Private agencies, including On-call and Language Line, also turned out to be major players in the provision of telephone interpreting work to Korean interpreters (see Table 3). Some interpreters reported that they also received work from other personal contacts.

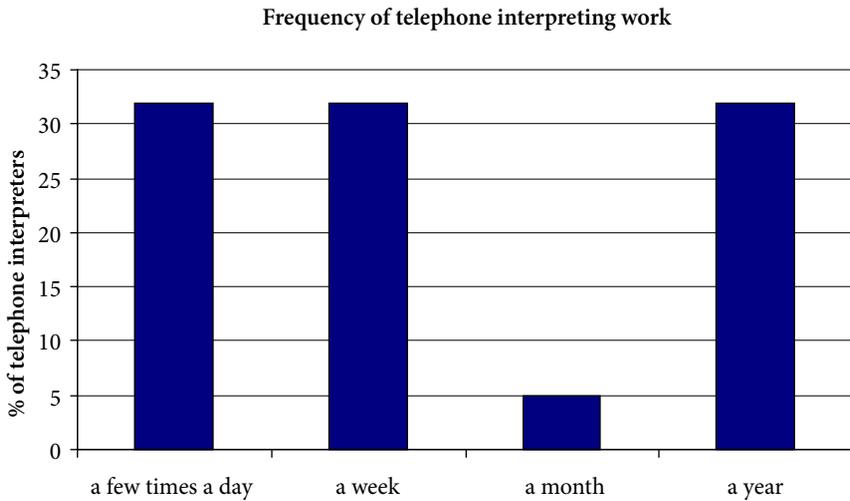


Figure 2. Frequency of telephone interpreting work

Table 3. Service providers and users

Service providers		Number of responses	Service users/ interpreting setting	Number of responses
Government agencies (10)	Centrelink	5	Government	12
	TIS	3	Hospital	5
	HCIS	2	Business	5
Private agencies		8	Education	2
Others		8	Others	2

The strong presence of the public sector in telephone interpreting is also shown in the range of telephone interpreting service users (see Table 3). The main users of telephone interpreting are government agencies, both in Australia and in the UK, NZ and US. The fact that foreign governments also use Australian telephone interpreting services demonstrates that telephone interpreting is not restricted by time and distance.

Interpreters' opinions about telephone interpreting

Attractions and challenges

The participants were allowed to give more than one answer when asked about the attractions and challenges of telephone interpreting (see Questions 8–9 in the Appendix). Cited as its greatest advantage was the convenience of not having to travel (see Table 4), followed by the opportunity it offers to make the most of spare

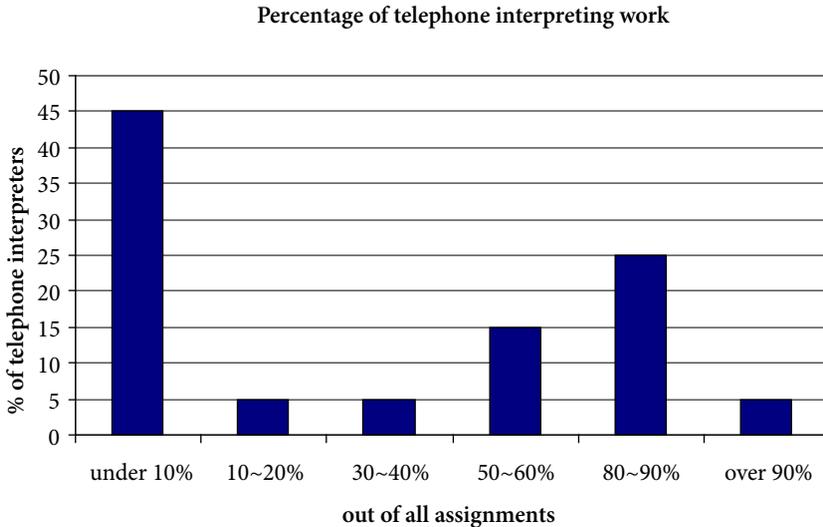


Figure 3. Telephone interpreting work as a percentage of total interpreting work

time and of flexible working hours. The convenience of working from home is also appreciated in that one can engage in other activities, such as housework, between calls. The absence of face-to-face contact was reported by some participants as another attraction, but also as a challenge. One participant stated that the absence of face-to-face communication helped to maintain neutrality and concentration, and two others liked the convenience of not having to face the other speakers. The view that telephone interpreting serves the community by helping people with language barriers was suggested by a couple of participants when discussing its positive features.

Table 4. Attractions and challenges of telephone interpreting

Attractions	Number of responses	Challenges	Number of responses
Convenience (no travel)	15	No face-to-face contact	14
Spare time use/flexible hours	7	Technical problems	4
No face-to-face contact	3	Inconvenience	4
Good service	2	Physical discomfort	2
Better concentration	1	Simple and tedious work	2
No advantage	1	No disadvantage	1

However, the attractions of telephone interpreting seemed to be outweighed by the challenges perceived by its practitioners, particularly the lack of face-to-face communication and visual information. Technical problems — such as poor sound

quality, lack of three-way connection facility and disconnection — and inconvenience were also seen as major disadvantages and are liable to affect the quality of interpreting. Some responses are included below:

If the other two parties use a speaker phone, the sound quality is not very good.

In the words of another interpreter:

When there is no three-way connection equipment, and the other two parties share a handset, it is frustrating because I often find that the person on the other end of the line has not heard my interpreting from the beginning, so I have to repeat again and again.

Another interpreter said:

The reception is sometimes bad. And sometimes, it is disconnected suddenly because of technical reasons.

Some telephone interpreters did not like the unpredictability and irregularity of telephone interpreting work because it was disruptive to their lives.

Sometimes I have guests at home, and I receive a phone call from the agency.

Sometimes I have to answer the phone when I am in the middle of cooking dinner.

Unpredictable and irregular work was coupled with the irregular income. In the words of one interpreter:

I can't afford to stand by for telephone interpreting work which I can't predict when it will come.

Interestingly, the simple nature of some telephone interpreting work was also regarded as a drawback by some of those interviewed. An interpreter (PI), who is no longer active in the community but occasionally does telephone interpreting in the business sector, stated:

In my case, telephone interpreting experience was mostly centred on simple customer services, such as bill inquiry, which could be handled by any bilinguals without much interpreting skills. That is why I don't do telephone interpreting unless it is an emergency situation I can't refuse... Most of the telephone interpreting I did was not challenging enough to be considered as professional interpreting.

During the discussion of the challenges, there were complaints about physical discomfort. The use of phones, especially mobile phones, which are used for telephone interpreting, was said to hurt ears and arms. Whatever its advantages in terms of mobility and availability, interpreting with mobile phones is usually not recommended because of possible bad reception and other technical reasons.

Most telephone interpreters work from home, and this working environment may pose inevitable or unpredictable problems different from those of the office environment. A telephone interpreter working from home stated:

When my dog suddenly barks at something while I am working over the phone, it is really embarrassing.

Telephone interpreting as a profession

Though all telephone interpreters were paid, almost half (46%) did not consider it as a profession. There was a difference between PIs and PPIs in regard to their attitude: 60% of PIs did not consider it as a profession, whereas 36% of PPIs held this view. Those who regarded telephone interpreting as a profession generally also agreed that it had a low professional status, which could be attributed to low pay. In the words of one interpreter:

It could be good, additional income for stay-at-home mothers, but I don't think I can call it a profession. It does not receive such professional treatment.

Another interpreter stated:

I would stop telephone interpreting if I had a choice. But I am expecting a baby and I live in a city where there is not much interpreting work.

A couple of the participants stated that telephone interpreting was a hobby for them. Generally, telephone interpreters did not think highly of it, regarding it as a temporary job and an additional source of income. In their own words:

I do telephone interpreting during spare time.

I accept telephone interpreting work only when it fits my schedule.

I consider this as a temporary job. I see no future and it is definitely not my career choice.

I just think I can make small money by interpreting over the phone without idling away time.

Remuneration

It is known that telephone interpreting generally pays less than on-site interpreting because no travelling is required. Most of the telephone interpreters agreed to specify their basic rate of remuneration, except for two, who avoided being specific. Some freelancers replied that they received similar remuneration for telephone and on-site interpreting, but others, who received telephone work through

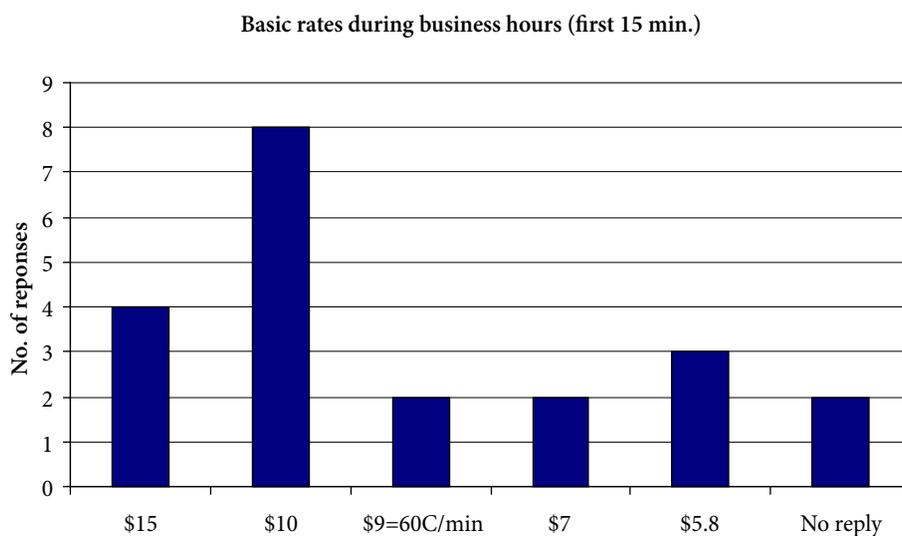


Figure 4. Basic rates during business hours

interpreting agencies, were remunerated at fixed rates. Since some worked for more than one interpreting agency, the participants were allowed to give multiple answers. Their responses were analysed in terms of the number of responses rather than the percentage of participants. Based on rates for business hours (from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.), the basic rates for telephone interpreting services ranged from \$5.80 (AUD) to \$15 for the first 15 minutes (see Figure 4). An agency's rate is usually calculated on the basis of a 15-minute period. The rate of one of the agencies was based on a one-minute period, which was translated into a basic rate of \$9 for the first 15 minutes to enable comparison.

The largest group of telephone interpreters (35%) received \$10. The average basic rate set by the agencies was \$9.40 for the first 15 minutes, but it is difficult to compare rates because these also depend on the duration of the call. The responses indicate that remuneration for telephone interpreting did not differentiate between accreditation levels.

None of the respondents found the level of remuneration for telephone interpreting satisfactory. About 65% felt they were poorly paid, and the satisfaction level was lower among PIs, 50% of whom were dissatisfied with the remuneration, than among PPIs, of whom 25% were dissatisfied (see Figure 5). Fifty percent of PIs found the remuneration level very unsatisfactory, compared to only 25% of PPIs.

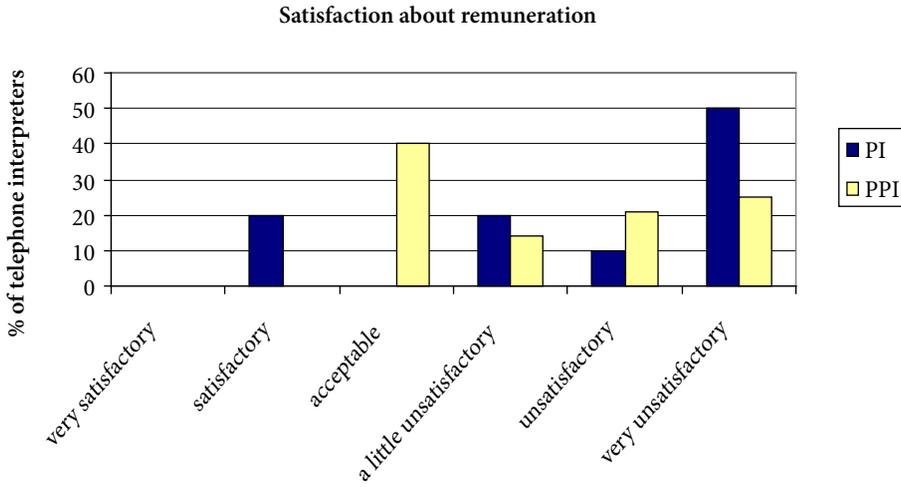


Figure 5. Satisfaction level in relation to level of accreditation

Reasons for considering quitting

Remuneration, inconvenience and other features of telephone interpreting seem to have led the interpreters to lose interest. Half of the respondents (equally distributed among PIs and PPIs) had considered quitting telephone interpreting.

Low pay is again the main reason for considering the discontinuation of telephone interpreting services, followed by inconvenience (see Figure 6). Some telephone interpreters attributed it to the irregularity of their work. These drawbacks were cited as the reasons for considering quitting, except for the low pay, which did not appear among the stated drawbacks of telephone interpreting.

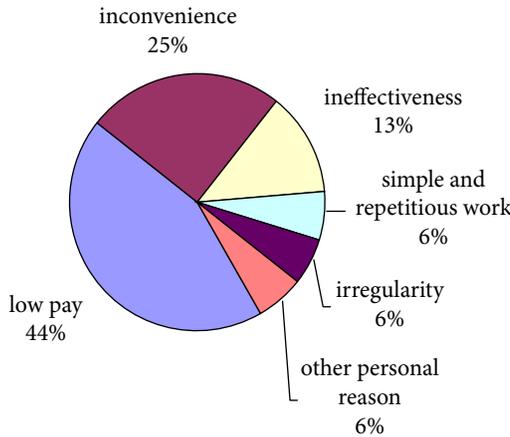


Figure 6. Reasons for considering quitting

Some were sceptical about the effectiveness of telephone interpreting itself. One interpreter, who interprets only occasionally on a casual basis while employed full time in another industry, stated:

I do not regularly do telephone interpreting, and I accept only emergency phone calls. I do not think telephone interpreting works. Sometimes, I feel it is not better than nothing. It looks like the outcome of a government's window-dressing policy to me.

The role of telephone interpreter

Interpreters' perception of the telephone interpreter's role

Only a couple of telephone interpreters stated that they had made it clear from the beginning of the interpreting job that they would just interpret and interpret everything, whereas most telephone interpreters thought they actively facilitated and managed the conversation. Below are some of the responses, which reveal different degrees of intervention by the interpreter.

I just want to relay the message, but if Korean speakers misunderstand and give unrelated responses, I intervene and explain.

Even if the Korean speakers' answers are irrelevant, I just let the English speakers clarify it.

I just interpret, but some speakers tend to keep talking and talking to me. When I can't stand it anymore, I explain my role as an interpreter, and tell the Korean speakers to keep their answers brief and to the point for the sake of efficient communication.

When they talk long, I cut in and tell them I need to stop them and interpret for the other speakers.

I feel I deviate from the professional ethics when I try to explain to make sure they understand.

The telephone interpreters' perception of their role varied depending on the accreditation level. Ninety percent of PPIs reported that they facilitated communication by making sure the parties understood each other, by giving an explanation, if necessary, and by complying with the needs of the communicative parties. However, only 44% of PIs replied that they facilitated phone conversations, whereas most replied that they just interpreted. These differences warrant further investigation into the role of the telephone interpreter; perhaps PIs are more conscious of the passive role of the interpreter, or else they may be more conscious of the restrictions of telephone interpreting, which does not provide non-verbal cues. One PI made the following comment:

I tend to stick more to a passive interpreter's role in telephone interpreting because I can't tell easily if they misunderstood, because face-to-face contact does not exist.

Service users' understanding of telephone interpreter's role

When asked about the service users' understanding of the telephone interpreter's role, all telephone interpreters thought English-speaking service users generally had a better understanding of it than Korean-speaking users. On the basis of the survey results in this study, this discrepancy in the familiarity with telephone interpreting may be accounted for by the fact that the English speakers are generally the employees of the institution or agency which uses the interpreting service, and the Korean speakers are people interacting with various institutions not only in Australia but also in the UK, New Zealand and the US. The findings indicate that many Korean-speaking users had not used telephone interpreting before, and thus were not familiar with how it works.

This question was further examined by asking the participants to report on whether service users address the other primary speaker in the second or third person. Telephone interpreters thought that almost all Korean speakers used the second person to talk to the interpreter and the third to refer to the English speaker. About 60% of English speakers used the second person to address the interpreter, only 10% used the second person to address the Korean speakers, and 30% alternated between second and third person when talking to Korean speakers. Since Korean-speaking users do not understand the role of the telephone interpreter, they sometimes mistake the interpreter for the staff or the employee of the institution they are dealing with. An interpreter stated:

Korean users do not understand my job, and think I am rude when I just interpret what the English speaker says.

First-person/third-person interpreting and the role of the interpreter

The last question in the survey dealt with the participants' choice of reference in telephone interpreting. All of them stated that they were aware of "first-person interpreting", but not all of them practiced it, and only 40% invariably used the first person. 15% of telephone interpreters interpreted in the third person, and 45% of telephone interpreters mixed first and third person.

Telephone interpreters stated that they tended to interpret in the third person more often over the phone than face-to-face. Some intentionally used third-person interpreting to avoid misunderstanding, and to make it clear who said what. One interpreter stated that she used the first person to the English speaker, and the third person to the Korean speaker. Some replied that they simply shifted to

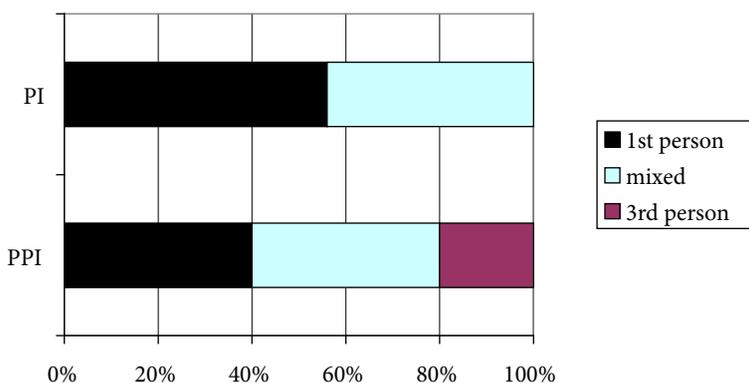


Figure 7. First- vs. third-person interpreting in relation to accreditation level (PI vs. PPI)

third-person interpreting although they had intended to use the first person. Others said they tended to follow the interlocutors' use of third-person pronouns. The participants seemed to be aware of the requirements in different settings. In the words of one interpreter:

I interpret in the first person in certain settings, such as legal interpreting, and most other settings. I interpret in the third person to avoid any confusion that I am speaking for myself.

The results suggest that the first-person interpreting principle may not always work over the telephone and that, for some reason, the interpreters are not comfortable with it. Here too, a difference was found between PIs and PPIs. As shown in Figure 7, 40% of PPIs stated that they usually interpreted in the first person, 40% mixed first and third, and 20% used third-person interpreting. By comparison, 56% of PIs said that they usually used first-person interpreting and 44% mixed first- and third-person interpreting. Be that as it may, almost all of those who used the first person maintained that they found it difficult to use the first person in telephone interpreting. Most admitted that they occasionally needed to intervene with "I, the interpreter" when communication did not go smoothly.

Those who mixed first- and third-person interpreting or interpreted only in the third person responded that they used "I" for themselves and "he/she" for the other parties. The mixed use of first-person and third-person interpreting implies that the telephone interpreter needs to speak as a mediator or facilitator in interactive communication to avoid confusion.

Discussion

This study has examined the profile of Korean telephone interpreters, their professional practice, and their opinions about telephone interpreting. The findings related to the profile of Korean telephone interpreters in the area of employment type and working experience tallied with those of the survey of community interpreters by Cheshier et al. (2003). However, the current study revealed differences between the two accreditation levels of telephone interpreters.

While the cost-effectiveness and convenience of telephone interpreting may be a major attraction for service users, it appears to have taken a toll on the morale of the interpreters themselves. Half of those questioned do not think highly of it as a profession, and have considered quitting telephone interpreting. The results suggest that this lukewarm attitude toward telephone interpreting is largely related to the low remuneration, as well as the challenges.

The prevailing dissatisfaction, especially among PIs, merits attention in connection with the professionalisation of community interpreting. The importance of using qualified and competent interpreters has been recognized in certain settings, where accuracy is deemed important, such as law and medicine (Hale 2004: 22), and PPIs are encouraged to seek a higher level of accreditation (e.g. Centrelink 2007). However, the current fee policy in telephone interpreting does not distinguish between accreditation levels, so that half the PIs see the remuneration as “very unsatisfactory” and 30% see it as “unsatisfactory”. Of course, these perceptions are subjective, and the lack of financial incentive may hamper the pursuit of higher professional certification as well as the retention of highly competent interpreters in the telephone interpreting sector.

This study demonstrates that telephone interpreters hold ambivalent views about their role. Most tend to assume the additional task of managing the communication. When they face a problem or misunderstanding, they often intervene by offering an explanation or even gently pushing the primary parties, usually the Korean speakers, to achieve the goal of communication successfully and efficiently. However, a higher proportion of PIs than PPIs subscribe to the conduit model of interpreting, and this is consistent with the findings about the choice of first- and third-person interpreting.

The findings of this study suggest that telephone interpreters are more likely to interpret in the third person over the phone than face-to-face. The frequent use of the third person in telephone interpreting may be closely associated with the interpreter’s role and the need to play a very active role in managing communication in the absence of visual cues and contextual information.

Nevertheless, the telephone interpreters seem to be less than confident about their choice of third person over the phone, perhaps because the first-person

interpreting principle is strongly entrenched in the interpreting industry and in interpreter education as a benchmark of professional practice. Bot (2005: 244) argues that first-person interpreting only serves to reinforce the myth of the conduit model and may cause confusion among parties not familiar with interpreting and the role of the interpreter. First-person speech works best when both primary speakers understand the role of the interpreter and know that the interpreter is not speaking for herself when interpreting in the first person (e.g. Bot 2005; Pollitt & Haddon 2005). Telephone interpreting may in fact create situations in which first-person interpreting presents problems.

Telephone interpreters' perceptions about the service users' lack of familiarity with this method, especially among the Korean speakers, may explain why first-person interpreting is not strictly adhered to. The finding that only two telephone interpreters (10%) establish their role before the interpreter-mediated communication starts indicates that inexperienced service users generally come to the encounter without orientation or understanding. In this situation, first-person interpreting may be even more confusing over the phone than on-site.

The area of telephone interpreting deserves further research to explore its unique characteristics. This study focused on telephone interpreters' perception of their role, based on questions about their normal practice. It was not possible to triangulate the findings with an analysis of authentic telephone-interpreted discourse for lack of access to such data. Both analyses of authentic discourse and survey research on role perceptions are required to investigate the behaviour of telephone interpreters in a range of settings.

Conclusion

This paper is based on a small-scale telephone survey of Korean telephone interpreters, and the findings cannot be generalised across other community languages in Australia. Given that telephone interpreting is a valuable service in a multicultural society, it deserves attention as a professional domain in the interpreting industry and in interpreter education. Telephone interpreting requires strong professional ethics as well as interpreting skills, including interpersonal and communication skills. A higher level of these skills is perhaps required than in some other settings because there is no face-to-face contact, and yet there has been a lack of research on this subject, and telephone interpreting has rarely been taught in spoken-language interpreter education or on-the-job training courses.

More research and education in telephone interpreting could lead to the development of appropriate protocols, which would ensure effective communication over the telephone, and identify or explore the telephone interpreter's role in

various settings. It would also be worthwhile to look into how the limitations of telephone interpreting, such as the lack of visual and contextual information, affect quality, and how challenges can be overcome. Awareness of the effects of these limitations and challenges will inform the policy concerning telephone interpreting in various settings.

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About the author

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Appendix. Survey questions on telephone interpreting

Telephone interpreter's profile

Accreditation level:

Gender:

Age group:

1. How long have you worked as an interpreter?
2. Do you work as an interpreter on a full-time, part-time or casual basis?

Telephone interpreting work

3. Do you provide telephone interpreting services?
4. How do you get telephone interpreting work?
5. How often do you interpret on the phone?
6. What is the percentage of telephone interpreting work compared to on-site work?
7. Who are the main clients/service users?
8. What do you think is the attraction of telephone interpreting?
9. What do you think is the most challenging aspect of telephone interpreting?
10. How much do you get paid for phone interpreting (basic rate during business hours)?
11. How do you find the remuneration?
12. What do you think about telephone interpreting as a profession?
13. Have you considered quitting telephone interpreting? If so, what are the reasons?

Role of the interpreter

14. As a telephone interpreter, do you facilitate communication over the phone or just interpret?
 15. Do you think telephone interpreting service users understand the role of the interpreter?
 16. How do the primary parties address each other? Do they talk to each other using the second person pronoun or do they talk to you and refer the other speaker in the third person?
 17. In telephone interpreting, do you interpret in the first person or in the third person?
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