Scholarly interest within Interpreting Studies (IS) has embraced broader horizons beyond conference interpreting in the last 25-30 years to explore other forms of interlinguistic and intercultural communication that have emerged in response to rapid transformations within our societies. Issue 19 of The Interpreters' Newsletter focuses on Sign Language Interpreting (SLI) one of these areas of IS that is developing in different parts of the world. Since the 1960s and ‘70s when attention was first turned in earnest to Sign Language Studies in the U.S.A. (cf. Stokoe 1960, 1972; Stokoe et al. 1965; Bellugi/Klima 1974; Battison 1974; Friedman 1976) interest in interpreting with a signed language also developed (Ingram/Ingram 1975; Solow 1981), offering potentially innovative approaches to future interpreting research.

The provision of formal training in SLI began in a handful of countries in response to a growing demand for qualified interpreters able to assist deaf people in a wide variety of social contexts and is spreading worldwide at an uneven pace (Napier 2009). Some training institutions have already gained several decades of experience in the field, whereas others are still at early stages of development or planning. Owing to diverse national linguistic policies and political short-sightedness or obtuseness, many obstacles to the universal provision of sign language interpreter training remain to be overcome in order to enable full access to the services of professional sign language interpreters.

This issue of The Interpreters’ Newsletter aims to address a number of topics of interest in this growing area of IS presented in the form of discussion on prevailing situations, personal impressions on the profession (e.g. the deaf end-user’s...
point of view), theoretically-based academic papers and empirical contributions. The contributors are all international SLI practitioners from the U.S.A., Australia and Europe: freelancers, trainers or researchers from various well-known centres of excellence in sign language teaching and/or SLI training.

This issue begins by presenting a scholarly discussion by Sherry Shaw on ‘service learning’ in sign language interpreter education in the U.S.A. She discusses preparing interpreters to “share common goals and form alliances with the [deaf] community” touching on issues such as “trust” and “responsibility” in order to eliminate the boundaries which often exist between interpreters and deaf consumers, without jeopardizing ethical standards.

In our era of high technology a paper on its application in SLI is appropriate. Erica Alley’s contribution covers the topic of video relay interpreting in the U.S.A. where numerous American Sign Language-English interpreters are employed in the VRS (Video Relay Service) industry, processing calls which are subject to guidelines mandated by the Federal Communications Commission or by independent VRS companies. She describes the service and guidelines before providing the results of a small pilot study on experienced VRS interpreters to gain insight into their perception of the origin and impact of VRS guidelines. This study suggests that ASL interpreters have insufficient knowledge about them to support their professional decision-making.

Preparation strategies are not extensively documented in either signed or spoken language interpreting literature. Brenda Nicodemus, Laurie Swabey and Marty M. Taylor present part of a study in progress that takes a look at SLI preparation to investigate the preparatory techniques adopted by professional American Sign Language-English interpreters. Retrospective oral reports were used to collect data on the preparation strategies employed by six professional interpreters for 20 minutes prior to interpreting a video-recorded version of President Barack Obama’s inaugural address of 2009. Afterwards, participants were interviewed on their preparation process principally to identify strategies used and determine patterns of usage. The lack of a standard approach would suggest a need for instruction on preparation strategies. The source text was a formal scripted speech of the political genre not commonly encountered in day-to-day SLI, but the kind of discourse interpreters may increasingly come across when interpreting live high profile media events either at the event itself in prae-presentia, or in absentia interpreting in another location e.g. a television studio (cf. Falbo 2012: 163-164).

Signed language interpreters’ working memory capacity represents an identifiable research gap in IS literature. The next paper by Jemina Napier and Jihong Wang reveals that different scoring methods for working memory span tasks produce discrepant result patterns. By comparing two scoring methods, they highlight methodological issues to be considered by researchers creating working memory span tasks to measure working memory capacity in both spoken and signed language interpreters.

Maya De Wit and Irma Sluis have recently conducted research in the Netherlands to explore the topic of sign language interpreting quality from the deaf end-user’s perspective. Following an overview of the training and professional development of Dutch Sign Language interpreters, they briefly dwell on the notion of quality in both spoken and signed interpreting. They then turn their at-
Attention to their research and methodology in investigating the criteria that users of Dutch Sign Language adopt in selecting interpreters. They report the results of an online survey and those acquired in four live settings, in order to map perceptions of quality.

Historically, interpreting has been associated with hearing practitioners, but as SLI has established itself worldwide, a new profession for deaf interpreters is emerging. PATRICIA BRÜCK and ELKE SCHÄUMBERGER have collected data from interviews with deaf interpreters in Europe conducted at the end of 2012 at the efsli conference held in Vienna. The eleven interviewees from nine European countries answered questions about their work environment such as co-working with hearing interpreters, assignment preparation and remuneration in their respective countries.

Interpreting with signed languages tends to be regarded as a specialized form of interpreting that remains far removed from spoken language mainstream interpreting. This is probably principally due to the evident difference in the communicative modalities used: visual/gestural versus aural/oral. Communication through visual/gestural means seems to most hearing individuals impossibly difficult to acquire and rarely encountered anyway in day-to-day life, as deaf people are part of an ‘invisible’ minority community in many parts of the world. My experience researching SLI for 15 years in Italy has shown me that few hearing people, including spoken language interpreters, know much about SLI or much about deafness in general. However, interpreting with a signed language shares many aspects of spoken language interpreting (Kellett Bidoli 2002), and furthermore, sign language interpreters do not work exclusively with signed languages (unless deaf) but have to interpret into and from the spoken word. I hope that by choosing to focus on Sign Language Interpreting in this issue of The Interpreters’ Newsletter, our mainly spoken language interpreter international readership will find similarities with their own research experiences in some of the topics presented by international experts in the field and gain a wider knowledge of this fascinating branch of Interpreting Studies.

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References


