Abstract

Telephone Interpreting (TI) is a long established professional practice, however there is a paucity of observational studies aimed at eliciting challenges and limitations as experienced by telephone interpreters, which could contribute to the development of effective interpreter education. There is a popular belief that training in dialogue interpreting can be applied to TI. The focus of this study is to gain an understanding of the specific features and situations that make TI trouble-free or challenging. We have elicited the various ways in which they have learned to grapple with difficult interactions over the years: from novices to advanced practitioners to seasoned interpreters. Responses from telephone interpreters from two different countries (Spain and Sweden) were also used to identify challenges that are culture-specific from the ones that seem to be universal. Our findings point to challenges that go far beyond the ones described in the TI literature, such as the lack of visual cues or complex and lengthy exchanges. Rather, navigating the client’s emotions, providers’ lack of awareness of interpreting needs and technical issues seem to be more central to an effective practice. The differences linked to levels of expertise and cultural backgrounds are analyzed and implications for training are extracted.

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Keywords

Telephone interpreting, TI difficulties, educational implications, survey research, Spanish and Swedish telephone interpreters.

Introduction

Telephone Interpreting (TI) is already a long-established professional practice employing thousands of interpreters throughout the world. TI environments present their own challenges and limitations (Oviatt/Cohen 1992; Ko 2006; Rosenberg 2007; Lee 2007; Kelly 2008; Ozolins 2011; Kelly/Pöchhacker 2015), and they contribute to the production of a particular type of remote dialogue. According to Rosenberg, most challenges in TI are related to the “situational factors and the lack of a shared frame of reference” (2007: 75). However, the findings from our preliminary study point to challenges stemming from various different sources, including those put forward by Rosenberg.

Notwithstanding TI is a long-established practice, official formal training in it is lacking. This does not mean that TI is not taught, but it is often down to the initiative of trainers to invite experienced telephone interpreters (TIs) to give talks or organize seminars on this practice, or down to remote communication companies to provide specific courses for their own interpreting staff. Consequently, TIs receive a heterogeneous training and, more often than not, TIs who work with languages of lesser diffusion receive little or no training and have to tap into their intuition or have to rely on their conference or public service interpreting skills to tackle TI challenges.

Some “practisearchers” have embarked on a mission to develop TI training modules to strike a balance between existing professional needs and limitations of the interpreting curriculum (González Rodriguez/Spinolo 2017). However, we believe that prior to the study of the acquisition of such competences, the features and challenges that characterize TI practice should be brought to light. One step in this direction is to tap into TIs’ own accounts of their daily practice and the most challenging situations they encounter when interpreting over-the-phone, as well as their over-the-phone experience when it occurs at its smoothest, i.e. their narratives.

The present study is part of a larger research initiative concerned with the development of a didactic solution to TI and video-based remote interpreting. The European Research Project SHaping the Interpreters of the Future and of Today: SHIFT in Orality takes an observational approach to a corpus of simulated instances of TI to extract information on major features and challenges of this type of remote interpreting. It combines the work of researchers from four European Union universities and the material provided by two remote interpreting companies.

Along with the empirical literature in the field, we have consulted Kelly’s (2008) seminal work, which describes TI practice, as well as Kelly/Pöchhacker’s (2015) review of the state-of-the-art research in this emerging field. With certain exceptions, very little empirical research has been conducted on the practice of TI.
itself, although there is an abundance of studies regarding user preferences (Locatis et al. 2010), providers’ satisfaction (Oviatt/Cohen 1992; Azarmina/Wallace 2005; Price et al. 2012), or the lack of quality of TI (Lee/Newman 1997; Hornberger et al. 1996). The aim of the current study is to make a contribution to the SHIFT project by gaining first-hand knowledge of what constitutes the major challenges faced by TIs and the specific solutions that they can use to resolve them.

When analyzing problematic issues in TI we should bear in mind that interpreting is considered to be a profession of specialists (Ericsson 2000: 202), which means that, as with doctors or computer programmers, professional interpreters and TIs must have acquired considerable hands-on experience before becoming professionals. Since the TIs that overcome the challenges associated with their profession gradually develop specific competencies and skills, we were interested in exploring the acquisition of such competencies and skills and in identifying the difficulties faced by novices in order to compare them to those of more experienced TIs. Consequently, we have adopted a comparative approach to the acquisition of competences by TIs of varying levels of expertise. This approach has provided a useful insight into the skills involved and the difficulties encountered by TIs. It is, therefore, a study on “relative expertise” (Tiselius 2015) in TI and, as such, it does not require us to establish a benchmark or absolute definition of expertise (Moser-Mercer 2015). Furthermore, exploring expertise by comparing its different levels provides a finer-grained insight into the progression of the acquisition of the skills required to become an accomplished telephone interpreter. Findings from these comparisons can prove very beneficial for the implementation of TI training modules at different levels on the expertise scale. This would allow a closer look into the stages involved in the development of expertise in the face of specific difficulties.

It is also important to note that the knowledge base of experts is organized rather differently if compared with that of less experienced interpreters (Künzli/Moser-Mercer 1995). According to studies in developmental psychology (Murphy/Wright 1984), expertise in a particular skill presents a more cohesive structure in memory, enabling the expert to use the information related to that particular skill in different contexts or to use information related to other skills in the context of that expertise. In the case of TIs, this means that experts would be more likely to use knowledge from other interpreting domains when conducting TI tasks. Access to knowledge about the transversal skills used by expert TIs would shed light on the specific skills from other interpreting domains that can be beneficial in TI training modules.

This study also aims at identifying cultural differences by comparing the results of TI practitioners from two different geographical backgrounds: Sweden and Spain. Identifying cultural differences would help to adapt the content of the curriculum to better fit the specific needs of TIs from particular cultures. Additionally, knowledge of shared similarities in TIs’ practices would also help to design more universal curriculum contents.
1. Methodology

Since the remit of the SHIFT research project is to shape the practice of the interpreters of today and tomorrow in telephone interpreting through a corpus-based observation, an online survey was used in this study to bring an additional edge to the project by including TIs’ own accounts of the challenges they face in their daily practice. This combination of research methods aims to strengthen SHIFT’s efforts in the advancement of training material and codes of best practice.

We strongly believe that the input from TIs is necessary, as we can gain an enormous amount of knowledge from these practitioners who have been too often overlooked. Their input is invaluable if we wish to shed light on the particular skills required to deal with specific problems in TI.

1.1. Method

1.1.1. Participants

The sample consisted of a total of 52 TIs from two large providers of remote interpreting services, one in Sweden and the other in Spain. In Sweden, 33 TIs from SEMANTIX (the largest provider of translation and interpreting services (both on-site) and TI in the Nordic countries) responded to the questionnaire. In Spain, 19 over-the-phone interpreters from DUALIA (one of the largest TI companies in Spain) responded to the online survey. The results from three Spanish and 15 Swedish TIs were discarded from the analysis because they did not complete the questionnaire. The mother tongue(s) and foreign languages of the remaining interpreters are detailed in Figure 1.

![Figure 1. The mother tongue(s) and foreign languages of the Spanish and Swedish TIs.](http://www.shiftinorality.eu/)

1 See SHIFT’s website (http://www.shiftinorality.eu/)
In order to establish a benchmark against which to measure the experience of the TIs, we asked participants how many years they had been working over-the-phone, if they worked on a regular basis, sometimes or seldom, and how many hours they worked per month.

The sheer variety in number of years of experience when tallied to the number of hours per month gave rise to a very complex picture. We therefore decided to count the total TI hours as a benchmark of expertise. It is important to mention at this point that the number of hours of practice is the standard measure of expertise in many fields (Ericsson 2000). The Spanish ISO/DIS18841 Interpreting Service – General Requirements and Recommendations also establishes 180 as the number of hours of work that are needed to grant experience to an interpreter. This number of hours means the individual is ready to enter the professional market, but is not a measure of expertise.

Three distinct groups emerged from both the Spanish and Swedish samples (see Table 1):
- seasoned TIs (more than 5,000 hours of experience);
- advanced TIs (between 3,000 and 5,000 hours of experience);
- novice TIs (less than 3,000 hours of experience).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Countries</th>
<th>Experience Category of TIs</th>
<th>Number of TIs</th>
<th>Years of Experience</th>
<th>Hours of Experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>Seasoned</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7 (2)</td>
<td>17,460 (8,678)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Advanced</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10 (2.5)</td>
<td>1,635 (321)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Novice</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3.4 (0.9)</td>
<td>291 (118)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>Seasoned</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>21 (1)</td>
<td>28,720 (6,998)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Advanced</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8.2 (1.9)</td>
<td>4,044 (327)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Novice</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4.7 (1.8)</td>
<td>1,088 (215)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Number of TIs, mean of Years of TI Experience, and mean Hours of TI Experience as a function of the Seasoned, Advanced and Novice Experience Category of TIs from the countries of Spain and Sweden. Note that the Standard Errors (SE) are in brackets.

It is worth mentioning that a large number of the TIs in our sample had reported having had previous experience working as public service interpreters.

1.1.2. Materials and procedure

Quantitative data were obtained by means of an online questionnaire, which elicited information regarding participants’ socio-personal, educational, and professional background. These findings were then tallied with the participants’ qualitative narratives of their experiences of difficulty (factors and situations that result in more problematic TI), and how they learned to cope and navigate these difficulties.
Narrative research provides a useful tool to make sense of the more complex contexts in which TIs navigate new technical and professional challenges, while describing the way in which they acquire professional expertise over time. Useful information can be obtained with regard to the degree to which the interpreter’s performance is impinged upon by the telephone environment, and/or by pragmatic, nonverbal and/or cultural considerations.

The questionnaire was designed with decisions on categories of questions and specific items that emerge from the literature on TI, and the additional contribution of the head of the Quality Department of DUALIA\(^2\), who is also a member of the SHIFT project (see Annex 1). A pilot questionnaire was administered to a small sample of interpreters working for DUALIA before the final questionnaire was uploaded onto the online server. All of the participants’ contributions were received online.

Narrative responses to each question were used to form new categories and each response was then converted into one of these new categories (e.g. if the participants wrote “quality of the phone line, I couldn’t hear the voice clearly” when responding about her/his worst experience, this response was converted into the category “technical problem”).

1.1.3. Statistics

According to the nature of the data, different statistical tests were used. Numerical data (number of hours of experience) in §2.1. Experience in TI was analyzed using a 2 (Country: Spain or Sweden) X 3 (Experience group: Seasoned TIs, Advanced TIs or Novice TIs) ANOVA. This analysis was used to confirm the differences between the various expertise groups and the similarities between the groups of different cultural backgrounds. Cramer’s V statistical tests were used to analyze the categorical data of the remaining sections where possible. When the minimum criteria required to conduct a Cramer’s V statistical test were not met, only descriptive statistics were employed.

2. Results

2.1. Experience in TI

The total number of hours (see Table 1) for Spanish and Swedish respondents was very similar (the difference between the respondents of both countries was not significant, \(F(1, 28) = 2.643, \ p > 0.1\)). Of central interest was the difference between the expertise groups in terms of number of hours of experience, which was significant (\(F(2, 28) = 21.207, \ p < 0.001\)). This effect was not modulated by the

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\(^2\) We would like to express our gratitude to Gabriel Cabrera Méndez and Nicoletta Spinolo for their invaluable suggestions for the questionnaire, and involvement in the pilot questionnaire.
participant’s country of origin ($F(1, 28) = 1.127, p > 0.1$), meaning that the level of expertise for each category between both countries was similar.

2.2. TI settings and geographical background

One area of interest in this study was to explore differences and/or similarities amongst TIs from different geographical backgrounds when it came to describing the challenges they encountered while interpreting over-the-phone in specific settings. We aimed to identify commonalities that could be further explored to extract possible universals. Before more closely scrutinising the differences in difficulty according to setting, it is worth mentioning that although both Swedish and Spanish TIs shared certain interpreting environments, there are some settings exclusive to each group of participants. For instance, interpreting for tourism seemed to be a task performed largely by Spanish TIs but somewhat less so by their Swedish counterparts. Swedish participants referred to interpreting services for schools, courts, asylum seekers and dental care, none of which were mentioned by the other group of participants (see Figure 2).

![Figure 2. Different and common settings for Swedish TIs (in blue) and Spanish TIs (in yellow)](image)

2.3. Most problematic settings

It is important to note that from now on, social services and asylum seeking have been grouped into only one category (Social services and immigration). Although immigration is a legal procedure that is distinct from social services, the scarcity of responses from both settings and the need to group answers together for a meaningful statistical analysis supported this decision. In addition, the fact that the contents of the immigration services provided by the TIs were similar to those elicited for the social services led to their being grouped under one heading.

We asked participants to disclose which of the settings they usually worked for was the most challenging, and which created the most difficulty for interpreting
on the phone. They were allowed to select more than one setting. If we compare seasoned TIs and advanced TIs with novice TIs for this item, we find beginners encountering problems in almost all settings, whereas the more experienced TIs seemed to have identified areas of difficulty in particular settings (see Figure 3).

Seasoned TIs found health emergencies (30%), social services and immigration (20%) and domestic violence services (20%) the most challenging settings. These were followed by city council services (10%), the court (10%) and healthcare (10%).

For advanced TIs, the most difficult settings to interpret over-the-phone were healthcare (23%) and police (22%), and, to a lesser extent, social services and immigration (11%), health emergencies (11%), city council (11%) and the court (11%) (see Figure 3).

Novice TIs seemed to have encountered difficulties in a higher number of settings. Their most problematic settings were interpreting for health emergencies (27%) and healthcare (23%). Interpreting over-the-phone for social services and immigration (11%), the court (8%), school (8%), dental care (8%) and the police (7%) seemed significantly less challenging than the former two settings. The least difficult settings were emergencies other than medical (other emergencies) and insurance companies (both 4%) (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Most difficult settings for seasoned, advanced and novice TIs
When we compare TIs across geographical origin, a less homogenous pattern emerges, since certain settings such as dental care, school and the court were exclusive to the group of Swedish interpreters. For the Swedes, healthcare is the most challenging service (19%), followed by the court (15%), the social services and immigration (15%) and the police (15%). Then comes dental care (12%) followed by health emergencies (8%) and school (8%) and finally other emergencies (4%) and city council (4%). By a wide margin, Spanish TIs consider health emergencies to be the most difficult setting to interpret over-the-phone (47%) and healthcare as very difficult (21%). Relatively less challenging appear to be social services and immigration (11%) and domestic violence services (11%), followed by insurance companies (5%) and city council (5%).

Taken together, it appears that the most problematic settings when comparing the data from all the interpreters were health emergencies (24%) and healthcare (20%) (see Figure 4).

![Figure 4. Most difficult settings for Spanish and Swedish TIs](image)

2.4. Least problematic settings

Conversely, we set about identifying the least problematic settings encountered by TIs (see Figure 5). For seasoned TIs, interpreting for the police (23%) and the city council (23%) were the two least challenging settings. Tourism, insurance companies, some types of healthcare and social services and immigration (all 12%) took second position in the ranking. Only 6% of seasoned TIs responses referred to domestic violence services as being a smooth encounter.

Similarly, a large number of advanced TIs also concurred with seasoned TIs on finding interpreting for the police as unproblematic (31%). A relatively smaller number found working in tourism and certain social services and immigration settings as less challenging (both 15%). Only a few responses by advanced TIs referred to health emergencies (8%), school (8%), city council (8%), insurance companies (8%) and healthcare (7%) as being less difficult than other settings.
Novice TIs from both countries found that interpreting for social services and immigration (30%) and the police (25%) were the least challenging settings, followed by insurance companies, healthcare and domestic violence settings (all 10%). Finally, other settings mentioned as least difficult by novice TIs were the city council, the court and health emergencies (all 5%).

Slight differences can be found when comparing the responses of Swedish and Spanish TIs. Almost less than half of the responses by Swedish TIs (41%) indicate that interpreting for the police is the least challenging task, followed by social services and immigration (23%) and health emergencies (9%). Finally, the settings that were most unlikely to be regarded as the least challenging were those such as domestic violence, city council, insurance companies, school, court and certain types of healthcare (between them amounting to only 4 and 5 %). Responses by Spanish TIs are more evenly distributed: 18% of responses involved the city council and another 18% the social services and immigration, such as the Red Cross. These responses were followed by healthcare (15%), the police (14%), tourism (14%), insurance companies (14%), and domestic violence (7%).

Figure 5. Least difficult settings for seasoned, advanced and novice TIs

Emilia Iglesias Fernández and Marc Ouellet
When looking at the data from all the practitioners together, interpreting for the police (26%) and some types of social services and immigration (20%) seem to be less challenging for the participants in this study (see Figure 6).

In order to test whether the responses for the least and most problematic settings truly differed from each other, a Cramer’s V statistical test was conducted to compare the number of least and most problematic responses regarding the two least problematic settings (police and social services and immigration) and the two most problematic environments (health emergencies and healthcare) by all TIs. The differences between the least and most problematic settings were statistically different ($\phi_c = 0.468, p < 0.01$), confirming that some settings are more prone to being considered as problematic than others.

2.5. Worst TI experiences

Participants were asked to remember and write down their worst experiences when interpreting over-the-phone. The use of open questions eliciting their expansive narratives of problems they believe impeded effective performance has allowed us to identify a set of neat categories of problems. One of the major concerns was linked to the fact that clients and/or providers did not respect turns, and interrupted and overlapped in speech. Similarly, side conversations between providers and operators or doctors and nurses hindered clear understanding and had a negative impact on performance. TIs complained that providers, operators, and clients still showed relatively poor awareness of their professional needs. There were recurring reports of clients not being alone in the room and various other voices being heard in the background at the time at which the client was addressing the interpreter. We have categorized this group of problems under the label “lack of provider’s/client’s awareness”.

The category “emotional state of the client” involved answers related to TIs handling highly-strung clients (either grieving, irritated, or furious). Some
of the situations related to the client’s emotional state involved the disclosure of bad diagnoses/prognosis, abused women crying on the phone, suicidal patients rattling on, incoherent talk and sobbing clients deciding whether to put a pet down, amongst others. All these situations show how clear comprehension can be seriously compromised when interlocutors are highly distressed. Likewise, clients venting their frustration with interpreters, voicing heated complaints against providers, or interlocutors engaged in heated discussions, made clear understanding extremely difficult. Considerably fewer TIs alluded to the other categories of problems.

Responses by seasoned TIs for this item were highly homogeneous. In particular, the more experienced the interpreter, the lesser the number of common problems encountered, a pattern of results that was independent of geographical background. In contrast, responses were more numerous and heterogeneous at the lower end of the expertise scale. Responses by each group of TIs (Swedish and Spanish) were also similar but distinct in their granularity.

Nearly half of the responses by seasoned TIs linked their worst experiences to “lack of provider’s/client’s awareness” (40%). A slightly smaller number of experts’ responses corresponded to the category we have termed “emotional state of the client” (30%). The third problematic experience mentioned by the more experienced TIs was related to poor telephone lines and to TIs listening to their own voice, which was disquieting and made understanding problematic. These inconveniences were categorized as “technical problems” (20%). Only 10% of responses linked the worst experience to billing issues, like getting a low pay (see Figure 7).

A substantial number of responses by advanced TIs (39%) shows that clients’ distressed emotional state (emotional state of the client) is highly problematic for TIs. Almost the same number of responses by advanced participants (38%) blamed the lack of provider’s or client’s awareness of their needs, by interrupting or overlapping while they were interpreting. A third issue that seemed to problematize interpreting over-the-phone was due to lack of sound acuity related to technical problems, but it was reported significantly less often (15%). A much smaller group of responses (8%) was related to the emotional state of the interpreter vis-à-vis distressful situations, which negatively affected the interpreters’ performance (8%).

According to novice TIs, the first hurdle when interpreting over-the-phone was the client’s or provider’s lack of awareness of the interpreter’s professional needs (34%). This category involved problems encountered when managing the flow of conversation and controlling the taking of the turns. The interpreter’s own emotional distress (emotional state of the interpreter) in the face of grieving or angered clients constituted 17% of the responses by less experienced TIs. Technical problems and the emotional state of the client were mentioned, each with 13% of the responses. These problems were followed by practitioners’ lack of access to visual information (10%) in some particular situations, and by the frail physical state of the client’s health (7%). A very small number of responses by novice TIs (3%) were related to poor terminological knowledge (terminology), and the same number of responses was related to billing issues (3%).
Although both Swedish and Spanish TIs concurred on three types of hurdles in their daily practice, the weight each group gave to these problems varied substantially. More than one third of the responses by Spanish TIs (36%) showed that they seemed to be highly affected by the *emotional state of the client*, and nearly one third of the responses (32%) were related to the *lack of provider’s/client’s awareness* of their professional needs, which rendered their performance problematic. A significantly lower number of TIs’ responses (12%) acknowledged difficulty in handling their own emotions (*emotional state of the interpreter*), as they felt deeply upset by the client’s anguish and distress. Less than ten per cent of responses (8%) pointed to *technical problems* as a source of difficulty in over-the-phone interpreting. The least frequent responses involved terminological issues (*terminology*), the *lack of access to visual information*, and difficulties related to the *physical state of the client* (4% each) (see Figure 8).
Nearly four out of ten Swedish TIs' responses (39%) were concerned with the lack of provider's/client's awareness about interpreters’ professional needs, particularly their role as turn managers (overlapping, interruptions, etc.) (see Figure 9). This hurdle was followed by technical problems (21%). The third and fourth difficulties experienced by Swedish TIs were related to emotions, both the emotional state of the client (11%) and the emotional state of the interpreter (11%). A smaller group of responses (7%) highlighted that some interpreters felt underpaid or experienced problems in getting paid for their services (billing). Another 7% of responses were related to lack of visual information. Finally, only 4% of responses blamed the frail voices of ill clients (physical state of the client) for difficulty in performance.

In total terms (see Figure 9), participants referred primarily to the difficulty of interpreting over-the-phone when providers or clients did not respect their professional needs (lack of provider’s/client’s awareness) by interfering in the flow of conversation in various ways (36% of responses). The second position on the challenges scale was the emotional state of the client, which impeded comprehension (22%). Persistent technical problems (15%) and the emotional state of the interpreter (11%) seemed to limit performance to a lesser extent than the two former issues. A minority of the responses (6%) referred to the lack of access to visual information,
and interpreting over-the-phone for clients suffering from frail health and weak voices (physical state of the client – 4%). Only 2% of the reported problems were related to insufficient terminological background (terminology).

### All TIs

![All TIs Diagram](image.png)

- Emotional state of the client
- Physical state of the client
- Lack of provider's/client's awareness
- Lack of access to visual information
- Emotional state of the interpreter
- Technical problems
- Billing
- Terminology

Figure 9. Worst TI experiences of all respondents

#### 2.6. Smoothest TI experiences

This question should have been worded differently, and this methodological shortcoming impedes the analysis of some responses, and justifies the reason why we present here the results of all TIs without commenting on the differences between the different groups. It appears that the wording of the item focused more on the rather subjective “rewarding experience” and less on the “smoothest” process. As a result, many answers elicited subjective, emotional memories of rewarding TI sessions (26% of the responses) (see Figure 10). Nonetheless, when we looked at the total number of the responses that did refer to a smooth telephone interaction, we realized that these smooth over-the-phone situations could be clearly divided into five categories.

One category was related to provider's/client's awareness of telephone interpreter's needs (37%). This was shown in narratives containing key expressions such as “short turns”, “turns with sufficient pauses”, “respect for turns”, “no overlapping”, “no interruptions”, and “speaker's talking loudly and clearly”. Another category involved the absence of technical problems (29%), such as “good phone lines”, and “acuity of sound”. A third category was related to the positive emotional state of the client (4%), that is, “calm conversation”, and “not heated discussions”. The fourth and fifth categories involved the positive emotional state of the interpreter (2%), who managed to “keep calm in a complicated situation”. Finally, a respondent also mentioned “good pay” as being part of the process (2%).
2.7. Need for visual cues

When looking at the data from both countries grouped together, nearly half of the sample of seasoned TIs (43%) stated that they did not feel the need for visual input to perform accurately (see Figure 11), but the same number of practitioners (43%) felt it would have been useful sometimes. A much smaller number of seasoned respondents (14%) stated they felt the need for visual cues when interpreting over-the-phone.

Regarding the advanced group of respondents (see Figure 11), over half of this sample (56%) felt they needed visual information sometimes, and a much smaller number of respondents (22%) had experienced no need for visual cues to interpret over-the-phone, while the same number of practitioners (22%) had missed not having access to visual data.

The percentage of novice TIs (see Figure 11) who felt they needed visual access to perform was higher (37%) than the two former groups of TIs (14% more responses than seasoned TIs and 22% more than advanced TIs). Additionally, a number of novice TIs (50%) mentioned that it would have been useful to rely on visual information sometimes in a similar proportion to both advanced (56%) and seasoned TIs (43%). The percentage of novices who stated that they could dispense with visual cues was considerably lower (13%) than advanced TIs (22%) and seasoned TIs (43%).
In order to test the statistical significance of the decrease in the need for visual cues with higher level of experience, a Cramer’s V statistical test was conducted to compare the number of yes, no, and sometimes responses between the groups of seasoned, advanced and novice TIs. The association between the responses of the participants and their level of expertise did not reach statistical significance ($\phi_c = 0.226, p > 0.1$).

The contrast in responses by Swedish TIs and Spanish TIs (of all expertise levels) for this item was considerable. More than a third of the Spanish TIs felt no need for visual information (38%), and only a very small number of Swedish interpreters (6%) shared that experience. Responses for the occasional need for visual input were broadly similar in both groups (56% of Spanish vs. 44% of Swedish TIs). The most striking difference between the two groups of respondents affected those TIs who expressed a need for visual input to perform (50% of Swedish TIs vs. 6% of Spanish TIs) (see Figure 12).

These differences between Spanish and Swedish respondents were statistically significant, as revealed by a Cramer’s V statistical test ($\phi_c = 0.538, p < 0.05$) looking at the association between the country of origin of the participants (Spain or Sweden) and their responses about the need for visual cues (yes, no, or sometimes).
3. Discussion

3.1. Most problematic setting and least problematic setting

When presenting the data from challenges related to the setting in TI, it is necessary to draw the reader’s attention to the fact that there were far more novice TIs in the sample than both seasoned and advanced TIs (see Table 1). As a consequence, it is important to outline the findings from the three groups along the expertise scale before looking at the data from all of the interpreters as a whole, since the data from the novices could draw the results in one direction or the other. In the same vein, it is important to bear in mind that the data from the Swedish TIs and the Spanish TIs for the most and least problematic settings cannot be compared across all settings, since certain services are only assigned to TIs in Sweden (e.g. schools).

For Spanish TIs, health emergencies represent the most problematic setting, probably because novice TIs and advanced TIs are exposed to these scenarios without prior instruction or experience. This contrasts with responses by Swedish TIs, who placed health emergencies very low in the ranking of difficult settings.
The majority of Swedish participants were novices and had probably not had considerable exposure to this type of service. The second challenging setting for Spanish participants was healthcare. The Swedish respondents concurred on this setting being problematic with almost the same number of responses allocated to this setting. For both Spanish TIs and Swedish TIs, social services and immigration represented the third setting in terms of difficulty.

The statistical test conducted for this item revealed a significant difference between the two most problematic settings (health emergencies and healthcare) and the two least problematic settings (police and social services and immigration).

3.2. Worst TI experience

Unsurprisingly, responses by seasoned TIs converged more homogeneously on the challenges of their practice. Their major concerns were also shared by advanced and novice TIs, but seasoned practitioners did not encounter difficulties in areas that were mentioned by the latter. Seasoned TIs cited three types of problems leading to difficulty in performance. For nearly half the group of seasoned respondents, challenges occurred first and foremost when there was a lack of provider's/client's awareness of the interpreter's needs. All the interferences resulting from this lack of awareness impeded TIs' clear understanding of information, which led to them missing essential information and not being able to follow instructions. These difficulties in turn-management and lack of respect for turns were also mentioned by advanced TIs but to a lesser extent than novices.

In second position on the difficulty scale comes the category related to the emotional state of the client with the concurrent strain in understanding. Clients' “sobbing, crying or behaving hysterically”, jeopardized a clear understanding of the message. In the same vein, technical problems represented the third major hurdle. This was followed by deep frustration at the enormous effort seasoned interpreters put into TI compared with the “low pay” they received. According to TIs, low pay and long hours led to lack of motivation, which, in turn, undermined the quality of their performance.

Advanced TIs concurred with seasoned TIs in the first three categories, but advanced TIs assigned a slightly higher priority to the problem related to the emotional state of the client than seasoned TIs, and a slightly lower priority to lack of provider's/client's awareness. However, it is worth noting that both types of problems occupied a similar position on the difficulty scale. The second largest concern of advanced TIs was related to difficulties “managing the taking of turns”, coping with “interruptions”, “overlapping speech”, and sub-dialogues between interactants. The third issue that hindered interpreting over-the-phone for less experienced interpreters was related to technical problems such as the “lack of sound acuity”. Despite some development and improvements in telephone lines and equipment, technical problems seemed to persist. More seasoned TIs and advanced TIs complained about “hearing their own voices”, or “hearing an echo” and “poor lines” than novice TIs. Unlike seasoned TIs, in the face of emotionally charged situations, advanced TIs were troubled by their own negative emotions (emotional state of the interpreter) interfering with interpreting over-the-phone. However, this
kind of challenge was only reported by less than ten per cent of the sample of advanced practitioners and occupied fourth position on the difficulty scale.

As previously observed in the patterns of responses of novice TIs, answers elicited regarding their worst experiences on the phone were much more numerous and scattered across many more domains. Less experienced TIs concurred with seasoned and advanced practitioners in placing the lack of provider’s/client’s awareness of their professional needs in the first position along the difficulty scale. But double the number of novice TIs than advanced TIs counted their own emotional disquiet (emotional state of the interpreter) in the face of the client’s suffering, anger or exasperation with the service and/or with them as the second source of problems that could hinder performance. This seemed to affect novice TIs more than advanced TIs, but it did not seem to impact the performance of seasoned practitioners.

Another situation where the less experienced practitioners encountered difficulty in handling their emotions was related to dealing with “clients suffering from mental health issues”. They claimed that they had not been trained to deal with these clients’ “incoherent talk”, “strong language” and use of “slang words”, which proved hard to make sense of.

The third position on the most challenging experience scale was only reported by slightly over ten per cent of novice practitioners, and it involved technical problems such as poor sound quality, poor lines, and the client’s inexperience with phones. The same number of novice respondents alluded to difficulty in understanding messages or instructions when the emotional state of the client was highly altered.

Unlike their seasoned and advanced counterparts, only novice TIs reported having an issue with lack of visual information, a problem that occupied fourth position in their difficulty ranking. Only less experienced TIs mentioned having experienced problems when trying to make sense of the talk of physically ill patients (physical state of the client), whose voice was extremely weak.

Novices were also the only group of participants who had encountered problems with terminology. They mentioned fields of medicine that were unknown to them, such as neurology and neuropsychiatry. Like their seasoned counterparts but in much smaller numbers, novice practitioners were not happy with the economic reward or pay for their services (billing).

Although both Swedish TIs and Spanish TIs agreed on four major types of hurdles in their daily practice, the weight each group gave to them varied in granularity. For instance, both groups of respondents considered the lack of provider’s/client’s awareness of their needs a significant obstacle to their performance. However, Swedish TIs were slightly more concerned with this issue and with technical problems whereas Spanish TIs seemed to find emotional issues (both the emotional state of client and to a lesser extent the emotional state of interpreter), and lack of provider’s/client’s awareness more problematic. Technical problems were found to be less troublesome for Spanish practitioners. For their Swedish counterparts, the billing issues (getting a low pay or problems related to getting paid) seemed to affect motivation and performance considerably more than in the case of the Spanish TIs.
3.3. Smoothest over-the-phone experiences

When we examined the total number of the responses that related to a smooth telephone interaction, it became clear that they were the opposite of the answers to the most challenging experience, irrespective of level of expertise and geographical origin. More precisely, respondents mentioned positive emotional state of the client, the provider’s/client’s awareness of TIs’ needs, the positive emotional state of the interpreter, the absence of technical problems and good pay.

3.4. Need for visual cues

Some authors (Moser-Mercer 2005; Mouzourakis 2006) have reported lack of visual cues as a strong case against the practice of remote conference interpreting, as it seems to undermine the quality of the service. It was therefore essential that this issue be explored in our survey. It was interesting and surprising to observe that the need for visual information seemed to decrease the wider the TIs’ experience. Seasoned practitioners expressed no need to access visual data in much higher numbers than advanced interpreters, and these, in turn, felt no need or little need for visual cues in higher rates than novices. The finding is not statistically significant, perhaps due to the higher number of novice TIs than seasoned TIs in the sample. A possible explanation for the large difference in Swedish and Spanish TIs’ need for visual cues could lie in the attitude to this issue by the Spanish company’s in-house trainer, who strongly advocates that TI can be effectively performed without access to visual information. This issue merits a study with a larger number of participants from both groups of respondents.

4. Conclusions

We launched an exploratory survey of TIs from two different geographical origins at different levels of expertise with the aim of identifying concurrent patterns of challenges and issues that could provide neat categories for a more ambitious study involving a much larger sample of TI practitioners. The ultimate objective of this larger study is to complement the findings from the SHIFT European Research Project and provide a source of information that could feed into training modules at different levels of difficulty. The patterns of responses to these issues have provided us with working categories for creating a final questionnaire. This questionnaire will provide quantitative data regarding specific challenges so that they can be placed and ranked along a scale of difficulty. Such granular information will help us to further define the contents of future curricular solutions in training as it progresses from less complex to more difficult TI experiences.

One revealing result involves the absence of visual information. Our findings suggest that the more experienced the telephone interpreter the less the need for

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3 Private conversation with Gabriel Cabrera, head of the training department at DUALIA S.L.
visual information. Further research with more respondents will allow for testing the statistical significance of this effect. The major differences observed between Swedish and Spanish TIs for this item could lie in the Spanish company’s strong position on this issue suggesting that effective performance of TIs can be achieved without the need to access visual cues, which is instilled in the whole instruction process. Further and finer grained research would also be necessary to investigate the cultural differences affecting the responses to this particular item.

Another interesting finding emerged from the most challenging experience in TI. The participants’ responses converged on the provider’s or client’s lack of awareness of their professional needs, particularly with interferences in the management of turns, interruptions, and side conversations. Equally, emotions played a greater role than anticipated in generating difficulty in remote encounters, with the more experienced interpreters (seasoned and advanced TIs) acknowledging that the client’s grief and irritation had a profound effect on their performance. High emotional distress of the clients led to muddled talk, which impeded comprehension. In contrast, novice practitioners seemed to be more affected by their own negative emotions in the face of the client’s suffering and/or exasperation than by the emotional state of the client. Consequently, the greater the experience in interpreting over-the-phone, the lesser the problem of controlling emotions when encountering distressed clients. More experienced interpreters seemed to have learnt to distance themselves from the client’s negative emotions.

Despite great developments in communication technologies, TIs still face poor lines, poor sound acuity, and echoes of their own voices. The perceived intensity of this problem grew with level of expertise, with few novices being disturbed by this issue and seasoned practitioners being most affected.

In the light of these findings, we appear to hold a different view to that of Rosenberg (2007: 75), as most challenges in TI reported by the participants in this study are related to the lack of provider’s/client’s awareness when working with TIs, the emotional state of the client, the emotional state of the interpreter, and technical problems.

Implications for training can be extracted from our data for the benefit of interpreter trainers, less experienced TIs and/or interpreters with no background in this setting. With the assistance of the input from Swedish and Spanish TIs, we would like to put forward a list of categories of challenges for training in TI (a more precise and quantitative proposal will follow the results of the second questionnaire).

A training module should involve recording simulated material containing any of the following hurdles to remote communication, a combination of some of these, and, at a more advanced level, the presence of a substantial number of the features that seriously impede fluent communication such as:

- side conversations between the provider and the client;
- the provider’s or client’s interruptions towards the interpreter;
- the provider’s or client’s long turns without pauses;
- the client’s sobbing, shouting or venting his/her anger on the telephone interpreter in accordance with the setting;
- the client’s incoherent talk due to emotional distress in various settings or due to mental problems;
interpreting a client with frail health and a weak voice;
- a suicidal client attempting to take his/her life;
- TIs listening to their own voices, poor lines, and poor sound acuity, amongst others.

Another challenge that should be addressed in the educational context is the presence of deictic information in clients’ descriptions of problems, and visual references thereof. Contents of a training module in the classroom should be reviewed by TIs to further benefit from their experiences when navigating challenging TI situations.

Acknowledgements

The author, Marc Ouellet, would like to acknowledge the support of a Juan de la Cierva Postdoctoral fellowship (JCI-2012-13046) granted by the Spanish Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC).

References


Dear interpreter! Thank you for your attention in the first place. We are currently conducting a study about professional practices in telephone interpreting. We would very much appreciate your cooperation, and will be pleased to share the results with you. Remember all your answers will be kept anonymous!

1. Type of interpreter training education e.g., conference interpreting, community interpreting; no specific training in interpreting (on-the-job competence); training in other disciplines; telephone interpreter training provided by the company.

2. Nationality and language combinations:
   - Mother tongue (A language);
   - First foreign language (B language);
   - Second foreign language (C language);
   - Nationality.

3. How many years have you been working as:
   - Conference interpreter;
   - Community interpreter;
   - Telephone interpreter.

4. Regarding your work as a telephone interpreter:
   - If you work on an occasional basis, how many hours per month?
   - If you work on a regular basis, how many hours per month?
   - If you work full time or nearly full time, how many hours per month?

5. In which of the following services do you work more often, in terms of hours per month? For each field, please rate with “never”, “sometimes”, “often”, “always”:
   - Health (healthcare in hospitals, health centres, clinics, etc.);
   - Health emergency;
   - Emergency units (other than health);
   - Social services and social care;
   - Police;
   - Domestic violence;
   - Insurance companies;
   - Local councils / municipalities;
   - Tourism;
   - Other (please specify).
6. Regarding the services mentioned in the previous question (health, health emergency, other emergencies, social services and care, police, domestic violence, insurance companies, local councils, tourism, other-specify-):

- Which of these is more challenging, and more difficult for interpreting on the phone? (you can mention more than one);
- Could you explain why?
- Which factors make interpreting the interaction more difficult in that service?

7. Regarding your personal experience with telephone interpreting:

- Could you share with us your worst work experience, when telephone interpreting was at its most difficult? (You can mention more than one experience);
- Could you explain what made interpreting so difficult?

8. Regarding your personal experience with telephone interpreting:

- Could you share with us your most rewarding telephone interpreting experience, when interpreting was at its smoothest? (You can mention more than one experience of smooth interaction);
- Could you explain what made telephone interpreting smoother and easier?

9. In your experience, do you find it essential to have access to visual information related to the interactants?

- No, I do not find it helps my interpreting performance;
- Yes, it would certainly make my interpreting performance better;
- Sometimes it can help my interpreting performance (please specify).