

Remote Simultaneous Interpreting: perceptions, practices and developments

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Abstract

This paper seeks to address the issue of remote simultaneous interpreting (RSI) focusing on the rapid spread of this interpreting mode since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020. To this end, practising conference interpreters were asked to participate in a survey aimed at exploring their perceptions of several RSI-related issues, from a quantitative and qualitative standpoint. The current paper analyses part of the results of that survey, offering an initial overview of the situation regarding RSI in the freelance conference interpreting market, its implications for the profession, advantages, disadvantages. From these initial results, conclusions can be drawn regarding the relative preference of interpreters for remote or on-site interpreting, the different forms of remote interpreting, the most widely used platforms, the locations from which RSI takes place, their advantages and disadvantages together with the solutions adopted to mitigate the impact of such disadvantages.

Keywords

Remote interpreting practices, Remote Simultaneous Interpreting, interpreting during the Covid-19 pandemic, interpreters' perception, interpreting technology.

Introduction

Remote interpreting (RI) is not a new phenomenon, particularly in community interpreting settings. Some authors place its origins in Australia in 1973 in emergency health settings (Fernández Pérez 2015), later spreading to the USA in the early eighties (Kelly 2008).

In conference interpreting settings, although RI (particularly remote simultaneous interpreting RSI) attracted increasing attention in the years running up to March 2020, in practice its use was limited. SIDPs (Simultaneous Interpreting Delivery Platforms) providing the technical means to offer this service appeared on the market before 2020 and many professional associations had begun to publish position papers and recommendations on the issue (AIIC 2019; ITI 2019; Cases Silverstone 2020). International institutions such as the United Nations and the European Parliament carried out studies to test the feasibility of introducing RSI (Mouzourakis 2006). Debates amongst professionals were ongoing, many expressing practical concerns and unease resulting from a feeling of insecurity and fear in the face of technology-related changes (Fantinuoli 2018a). DG SCIC chaired an ISO working group on the issue with the aim of drafting international standards on remote platforms. In the process, an in-depth study of several SIDPs was carried out in 2019, the results of which fed into a Publicly Available Specification on RSI platforms, pending the development of a full ISO standard¹. Therefore, we can see that the issue of RSI was a clear reality in the field of conference interpreting before 2020 as part of a wider technological trend in the profession which had been referred to as “the upcoming technological turn in interpreting studies” (Fantinuoli 2018a: 11). Indeed, RSI had already been dubbed the greatest change in the profession since the use of simultaneous in the Nuremberg Trials (Constable 2015; Fantinuoli 2018b).

The sudden outbreak of the pandemic, with its sweeping lockdowns and social distancing, meant that the world we had previously known ground to a halt. Online communication, for which no sector was wholly prepared, became the only outlet in all spheres of life. As a result, solutions that had not been fully developed or were in a pilot phase, such as online teaching, online meetings and RSI, suddenly became the only possible solution and were adopted across the board. Not only did this herald in sweeping changes in communication practices in general but also altered previously existing professional standards. RSI emerged as a modality which responded to new corporate and institutional needs based on disruptive technology (Kaplun 2018; ANETI 2020) signalling an unprecedented paradigm shift.

1. RSI: general considerations

In this paper we use the terms RI, distance interpreting and RSI to refer to any form of interpreting in which the interpreter is physically removed from the

¹ ISO/PAS 24019:2022 <<https://www.iso.org/standard/80761.html>>, accessed September 29, 2022.

speakers and/or listeners of the communicative act in which s/he is involved, regardless of whether these other participants share a location or are also remote from each other. In other words, we are not using the term RSI to refer exclusively to totally location-neutral events but rather to subsume a number of possibilities encompassing different constellations of who is where (Fantinuoli 2018a). Amongst these possibilities we find hybrid events, which are partly on-site and partly remote, or working from hubs, i.e. interpreting studios where interpreters work together in booths with the support of technicians, but with the speakers and audience participating remotely.

Whilst the reasons for scholarly interest in RI were clear before 2020, the sea-change that came about subsequently has made research an urgent necessity, on the one hand to further our understanding of such a radical change and, from a practical standpoint, to underpin the justification for new working conditions and training methods in this rapidly evolving professional landscape, enabling the profession to participate actively in shaping and driving the profession of the future, rather than simply reacting to external forces (Tejada Delgado 2019).

Before the Covid-19 pandemic, RSI had already been the object of research, particularly regarding videoconferencing in legal interpreting settings (Braun/Taylor 2011). However, research has not been limited to community or legal settings, as studies were also carried out in RI in conference interpreting settings (Moser-Mercer 2003, 2005; Roziner/Shlesinger 2010; Seeber *et al.* 2019). Although such research was performed when RI was a new possibility beginning to appear on the horizon, it can no doubt help to shed light on the many issues now surfacing with the widespread use of remote conference interpreting since March 2020.

As yet there has been little academic research published on RI since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic probably due to the lengthy publishing process in academic outlets. Some studies are beginning to see the light (Przepiórkowska 2021; Chia-Ming Fan 2022; Ortego Antón/Fernández Minga 2022) and no doubt more will follow. RI is also the topic of some unpublished undergraduate and graduate dissertations (e.g. Ferri 2021; López González 2022; Pedrouzo González 2022). However, in the period since March 2020 there have been many documents published online, recommendations issued by professional associations and debates, seminars and forums for professionals that provide a context for the study of RI and are included as references in this paper. In most of these, similar issues are repeatedly flagged up with regard to the advantages and disadvantages. Some of these issues had already been mentioned in studies carried out before the pandemic (Moser-Mercer 2003, 2005; Mouzourakis 2006; Braun/Taylor 2011; Seeber *et al.* 2019). The positive issues arising point to RI offering greater flexibility, a widening market which is now global, an increase in meetings that would otherwise not have hired interpreting services, a reduced carbon footprint and an easier work/life balance (Tejada Delgado 2019). On a more negative note, the topics raised refer to technical issues such as sound quality and internet connection stability, security issues such as data protection and liability, cognitive overload and negative effects on interpreters' health and wellbeing, together with the practical measures to offset the impact of all the above (Ferri 2021; López González 2022; Pedrouzo González 2022).

There is now a wealth of professional experience in RSI which has been evolving at a rapid pace since March 2020. The present study attempts to tap into that practical experience with regard to the aspects repeatedly appearing in the documents, recommendations and debates mentioned above, exploring interpreters' perceptions regarding the most widely mentioned issues in an attempt to identify noticeable trends.

It is a given in the interpreting community that cognitive load² is increased during RSI in comparison with on-site interpreting (AIIC 2019; Ordeig 2019; ANETI 2020; Cases Silverstone 2020; Vita/Sentamans 2022). This is primarily due to the fact that the interpreter performs more concurrent tasks which, in turn, generates increased stress: in addition to listening and speaking, the interpreter must construe meaning without the numerous sensory inputs of an on-site event (Constable 2015) whilst managing the handover process with colleagues who are physically absent, liaising with them through an online chat or video call, and experiencing constant concern about the internet connection. The effects of such conditions have led to recommendations regarding shorter shifts, the number of interpreters per assignment and the length of the working day (AIIC 2019; ITI 2019; Cases Silverstone 2020; FIU 2020; ANETI 2020). Both Moser-Mercer *et al.* (1998) and Braun (2011) had already suggested that simultaneous interpreting shifts should be shorter in remote settings due to the effect of increased cognitive load on performance during the second part of a 30-minute shift, when the interpreter is becoming tired.

One of the basic issues in all forms of interpreting is sound quality and particularly so in remote settings. This fundamental issue, which has been the object of widespread attention both before and since the onset of the pandemic, may have effects on interpreting performance, quality, interpreters' health and liability. Previous research and the ISO/PAS have established the minimum acceptable thresholds in technical terms (AIIC 2019)³.

A further issue widely mentioned in the interpreting community is security and data protection, understandably so when confidentiality may be at risk in online events or interpreters held liable for security breaches. Indeed, Zoom, which appears to be the most widely used platform, initially had serious problems regarding data security (Howell 2021).

Working in a remote setting in principle opens up a wider market for interpreters (Bond 2019; DG SCIC 2019; Jiménez Serrano 2019a) who can theoretically operate on different continents in the course of the same day and obtain more contracts in general, as RI lowers organisational costs. In practice, however, in a global market interpreters may have to compete with colleagues who have not secured adequate working conditions, thus opening up the possibility of the hard-fought gains of the on-site market, such as limited working hours, working in pairs and adequate technical conditions amongst others, being lost or reduced in remote settings. Such working conditions guarantee quality interpreting and

2 Cognitive load refers to the amount of mental activity imposed on working memory at any one time.

3 Results regarding sound quality and health impacts will be analysed in a future publication.

an appropriate professional environment for practitioners. In some forums, interpreters report modifications in the way fees are calculated and the amount of fees in general, and some reports point to organisers occasionally suggesting that RI should be remunerated at lower rates than on-site interpreting (Jiménez Serrano 2019b; Ferri 2021).

Health issues have also been the subject of debate and recommendations among professionals since March 2020. In particular, over the past two years concerns have been voiced regarding acoustic shock (high intensity, high frequency sounds) and toxic sound (potentially harmful environmental noise) due to inadequate sound quality, more frequent with remote interpreting equipment than on-site (Mahyub Rayaa 2022).

There has also been interest in the general wellbeing of interpreters as the increased cognitive load of RI, due to the increase in concurrent activities performed, coupled with the limitation of communication channels, would seem to cause increased fatigue, lack of concentration, feelings of alienation and general anxiety. There is every reason to suppose that RI involves the same screen fatigue as that mentioned by many non-interpreters, suddenly forced to conduct their lives online during the lockdown period of the pandemic. Prolonged online activities would appear to lead to feelings of alienation (Moser-Mercer 2003; Mouzourakis 2006; DG SCIC 2019). In fact, the interpreters who participated in DG-SCIC's study suggested that "every little home noise became a distraction and made concentration difficult" (DG SCIC 2019: 10).

Interpreting has always been classified as a stressful occupation, and anxiety may be increased in remote settings due to potential problems inherent in such settings, for example, dependence on an internet connection, lack of technical support, possible power cuts and legal liability if such events occur (Ordeig 2019).

Teamwork has always been at the heart of conference interpreting (Ordeig 2019) and yet, in many RI situations, having a boothmate located remotely means that such teamwork is very difficult to maintain, as is rapport-building with organisers, speakers and participants.

Feelings of alienation in this new context are not only due to the marked difference between working at home alone and the close teamwork in most on-site interpreting. RSI is part of a wider economic trend in which technology is used to commoditize services and depersonalize their providers (Fantinuoli 2018a, 2018b; García Crecente 2019).

Digital platforms are at the heart of this new business model in our economies which has upturned the traditional service industries in a trend which has been labelled "uberisation" (Chamorro-Premuzic 2014) or the "gig economy" (Brown 2009). Even though tools such as Google Docs provide the possibility for joint work on glossaries and sharing of documents for preparation, on-site teamwork is clearly undermined by this new technology-driven order as the interpreters' activity becomes fragmented, and practitioners become isolated at the end of the supply chain.

In this context, with an ever-widening distance between the suppliers and consumers of goods and services, decision-making about how the profession is practised is no longer in the hands of the practitioners but, rather, in the hands of those who control the technology. Thus, practitioners risk losing control over

how their profession functions and, as a result, are unable to guarantee the working conditions necessary for high-quality service (Kahane 2020).

It seems essential for interpreters to understand and digest this disruptive technology-based transformation in the profession and participate in the process to have at least some influence on the change (García Crecente 2019; Fantinuoli 2018a; Tejada Delgado 2019), unlike the written translation sector in which, even though the technological paradigm shift has been more gradual, practitioners' terms are largely dictated by the major translation software companies (Jimenez Serrano 2019b).

2. Aims of the study

The general aim of the present study is to canvass the opinions and perceptions of a group of professional interpreters with regard to RI, specifically RSI, following two years of the Covid-19 pandemic (March 2020 to March 2022) and coinciding with the gradual removal of restrictions. The study seeks to explore these opinions and perceptions about the impact of RSI on professional standards, the technical implications of RSI, and its comparison with in-person interpreting. It is hoped that trends will be identified that can facilitate our understanding of the evolution of the profession during those two years and contribute to the necessary reappraisal of working conditions in this new scenario.

More specifically, the aims of the study seek to ascertain the following:

- Which mode of interpreting is most widely used in remote settings, the frequency of remote assignments, the average length and format of such assignments, the locations from which interpreters work and the platforms used.
- Whether interpreters have received training in RI and, if so, the nature, length and desirability of such training.
- Interpreters' opinions regarding the advantages and disadvantages of RSI in comparison to in-person interpreting and their preference, if given the choice, between one or the other.
- Interpreters' opinions regarding the impact of RSI on the profession, specifically in relation to their performance, fees, volume of work and health.

The current paper will study the first three aims, leaving the fourth for a future publication.

3. Methodology

This research is based on an anonymous on-line survey with a largely qualitative approach aiming at the identification of trends, as has been stated. No statistically significant results are sought. The original survey questionnaire was in Spanish and contained 24 mostly open-ended questions aimed at obtaining as much qualitative information as possible.

This initial version of the survey questionnaire was piloted by a group of five experts, who all filled in the survey and subsequently took part in a focus group

discussion. All were conference interpreters and two also had research and academic experience in translation and interpreting.

As a result of this process an additional section was added on Training in RSI and the order of some sections was changed. Moreover, several open-ended questions were subdivided into multiple choice questions with an additional field for participants to add comments. The final version of the survey after the pilot process contained a total of 54 questions, due to the addition of more multiple-choice questions (cf. <https://forms.gle/dM55ut1gYowCNxFh8>).

The current paper analyses the responses to the first 33 questions.

Google Forms was chosen for the design and administration of the on-line survey as it offers straightforward survey instrument design and processing of the data, and participants would probably be familiar with this popular platform. Moreover, it offers a guarantee of anonymity.

The final version of the survey was sent to various professional associations of interpreters⁴ on 08/02/22 with an explanatory email. The deadline for completion was 08/03/22. A reminder was sent to the same forums one week after the survey was initially sent. 37 responses were received, accounting for just over 33% of the target population, consisting of approximately 112 interpreters⁵.

The survey was drafted in Spanish and begins with a brief explanatory text (see link above) which refers to the general aims of the study and requests informed consent for participation. If potential respondents declined to give consent, they could not access the survey questions. This preamble also informed participants that the approximate time for completion was 15 minutes, estimated according to the results of the pilot phase. Email addresses were included to request further information if required.

As is standard with Google Forms, at the end of the survey respondents were asked for confirmation before sending their responses, thus avoiding answers being sent by mistake and allowing the participant to abort the sending process if desired.

Google Forms collates the replies on a spreadsheet, assigning a new line to each participant with all their answers, specifying the date and time of each response, and indicating the acceptance of informed consent.

The responses to the first 33 questions were extracted and are analysed in this paper. The spreadsheet facilitates the calculation of the quantitative replies to multiple choice questions and calculates percentages, together with the correlations between replies. It also produces graphs representing the results, amongst other functionalities. Complex statistical analysis software was not used as the nature of the sample did not require it. The qualitative answers to open-ended questions were analysed and codified according to their content. Subsequently, an order of greater to lesser frequency of topics raised was established, reflected in sections 4 and 5 (Results and Discussion).

As occurs with other methods of scientific research, anonymous on-line surveys have their advantages but also their limitations (Opdenhoff 2011; Andrade

4 Full answers to the survey, including the associations to which respondents belonged, can be consulted at: <<https://figshare.com/s/9512c888638448992bd2>>.

5 This reflects the total number of interpreters in the forums the survey was sent to, but it may have reached other interpreters outside these forums.

2020). We have attempted to minimize the limitations although some may persist and should be taken into account when interpreting the results of the survey or extrapolating them to RSI in other contexts. The following are the main limitations detected.

- The survey was administered in Spanish so, inevitably, its scope is limited to those practitioners who speak this language.
- The survey was sent to professional organisations based in Spain, which could limit its scope to the Spanish or Spanish-speaking market. However, due to the international nature of the profession and the delocalization brought about precisely by RSI, the results show that, in addition to Spain, respondents are based in Brussels, Argentina, Australia, USA and several Arab states.
- Another limitation may take the form of self-exclusion by those interpreters who seldom or never perform RSI, as they may have understood that the survey was not aimed at them. Indeed, we are aware that at least three senior colleagues did not fill in the survey for this reason, although that was not the intention of the authors, as their perception would have been equally useful and interesting. This attitude could possibly have weighted the results in favour of those interpreters who work more frequently in remote settings.
- The survey does not apply any specific mechanism to prevent double participation. Methods can be applied to this end, although we chose not to do so for several reasons, preferring to trust in the responsibility and honesty of the participants. It was deemed unlikely that this would be a problem, bearing in mind that in interpreting research the difficulty would seem to be the opposite: securing participation in such surveys (Opdenhoff 2011). Secondly, the various methods for avoiding double participation are not totally effective, do not guarantee anonymity and could even limit the number of bona-fide responses received. No duplicated responses have been detected.
- Some questions had two parts, an initial multiple-choice question followed by an open-ended section to provide explanation of the multiple-choice answer. In a limited number of cases, respondents only replied to the multiple-choice section and did not justify this answer with an explanation. This made interpretation of the results less detailed and nuanced.

4. Results

4.1 Participants

Thirty-seven responses were received, indicating an approximate response rate of over 33% calculating the number of interpreters to whom the survey was sent, although it may have been forwarded to others. The majority of respondents were aged between 51 and 55 (20%), followed by 41-45 and 56-60 years (17% each). In overall terms, 74% of the sample were over the age of 41.

The vast majority were women (79%), whilst men accounted for 18% of the sample. Responses indicated that 77% had more than 16 years of professional experience, and 26% had between 31 and 35 years of experience.

Over 81% of respondents had Spanish as their A language, although, in some cases, in combination with English, Arabic, Italian, Catalan or Galician (i.e. subjects with double A). The majority B language amongst the participants was English (46%) and the majority C language was French (32%).

There was a high level of membership of professional associations, accounting for 83% of participants. 54% were members of AICE (the Spanish Professional Association of Conference Interpreters), whilst 14% were members of ASETRAD (the Spanish Association of Translators, Correctors and Interpreters). Other associations mentioned are AIIC (International Association of Conference Interpreters), ATA (American Translators Association) and AUSIT (Australian Institute of Interpreters and Translators). 7 respondents had no professional affiliation.

70% of the subjects indicated that their main market was Spain although others indicated that they also worked on other markets (European countries, Australia, Arab states, USA). Five participants stated that they worked on the Brussels market, whilst 4 were based in Argentina.

4.2 RI and its modalities during the two years of the pandemic

100% of the respondents performed RI assignments during the period 2020-22. The following figure reflects the modes of interpreting involved. Respondents could mark more than one option.

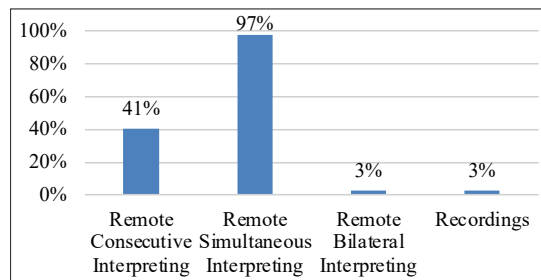


Figure 1. RI modes performed.

This study focuses on RSI, which has been performed by 97% of participants. The following question inquired about the frequency of RSI.

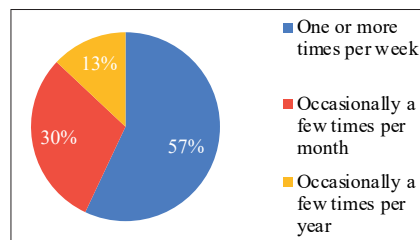


Figure 2. Frequency with which RSI is performed.

Respondents were requested to provide a general description of their RSI assignments. There is a wide range of different kinds of assignments, from short sessions of less than two hours with a small number of participants to international conferences of an academic, business or political nature, in one case with delegations from 26 countries. Comments reflected a wide variety in many organisational aspects and in the RSI platforms used.

The most frequent average length per assignment is a half-day (70%), covering events lasting from 90 minutes to 4 hours, followed by assignments lasting between 30 and 90 minutes (24%).

With regard to the format of remote events interpreted, 76% of respondents state that they are totally online, and 19% that they are mostly hybrid, with one or more of the parties (interpreters, speakers, or audience) participating from a remote location.

87% stated that they usually perform RSI from home, although more than one option could be marked. The other locations were as follows:

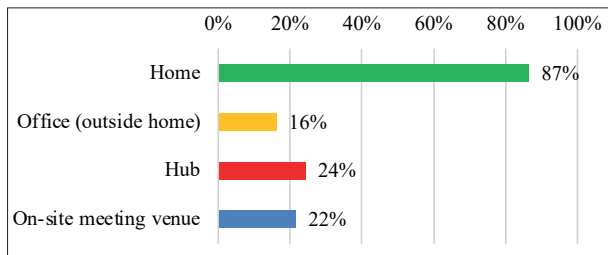


Figure 3. Location where RSI is performed.

4.3 Platforms used in RSI

Participants were asked to indicate the RSI platforms they worked on, using a scale from zero (never) to five (maximum frequency). Zoom clearly stands out ahead of all other platforms, with 70% of participants indicating “maximum frequency” and 16% indicating “high frequency” (number 4 on the scale). Figure 4 shows the results obtained in this section.

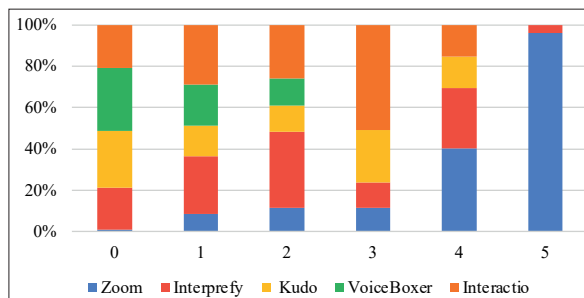


Figure 4. RSI platforms: frequency of use.

Other platforms mentioned are Webex, Teams (for consecutive mode), Blue-Jeans and Olyusay.

Respondents were asked whether they received technical assistance when working with platforms that do not automatically provide it, such as Zoom. The results are presented in Figure 5.

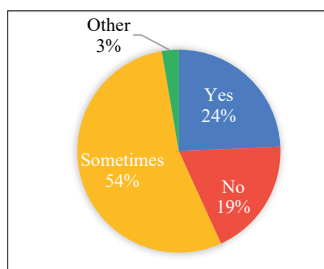


Figure 5. Technical assistance in Zoom and other platforms that do not provide it.

4.4 Training in RSI

60% of respondents stated they had received training in RSI, whereas 32% had not and the remaining 8% marked the box for “other”, indicating *ad hoc* practice sessions with colleagues before their first RSI experience.

The majority of those who had received training (71%) had done so in workshops offered by the SIDPs, followed by 33% who had received training offered by some other entity. More than one response to this question could be marked. Amongst the “other entities” respondents mentioned professional associations and agencies.

With regard to the length of training, the 22 participants who answered this question indicated varying lengths, with the majority having received between one and five hours per platform. Other, individual answers mentioned longer training periods, of between 12 hours and several days during 2020.

76% of participants considered training in RSI to be necessary, whilst 14% felt that it was not. The remaining 4 participants (11%) commented that whilst it may be useful it was not essential, and a brief explanation would suffice.

In the 33 comments made, most participants acknowledged that RSI is similar to in-person interpreting, but the majority believe that RSI has specific features with which interpreters need to become familiar, particularly in the initial stages, for example the functioning and technical requirements of the different platforms. Other issues mentioned were the need to learn how to coordinate with booth partners when working on Zoom, and how to deal with auditory and cognitive fatigue.

Some answers indicated that training helps to reduce the additional stress caused by working in an unknown online environment or being dependent on technology. It was also stated that training improves the professional nature of the service and may also enable interpreters to help clients in the event of technical problems. Finally, it was pointed out that RSI is the future of the profession

and should therefore be the object of training initiatives and university courses.

The few respondents who considered training unnecessary indicated that “it is only the format that changes, the actual technique is the same” or “if you work from a hub, training is not needed”.

4.5 Preference between RSI and in-person interpreting

49% of respondents preferred in-person interpreting to remote, whilst 24% chose RSI. 27% did not come down clearly on either side and in practically all cases preferred a combination of both formats, stating that they are complementary and that when much travelling is involved, RSI is preferred.

4.6 Preference of location for RSI

When asked about their preferred location for performing RSI the results were as follows:

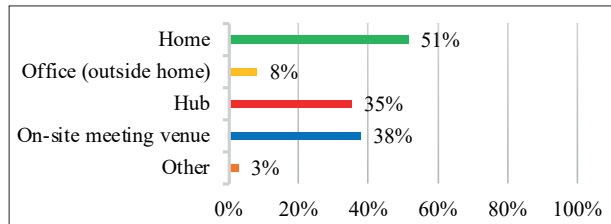


Figure 6. Preferred location for performing RSI.

One or more options could be chosen and it is interesting to note that 15 participants (41%) selected their home as the only option; 4 (11%) selected “home”, and also either a “hub”, “the venue of the event” or “their office” (outside the home). 7 participants (19%) selected a hub and the venue of the event, and 4 respondents (11%) selected “hub” as a single option.

For those preferring to work from home, the main reason given was convenience, followed by time-saving in journeys to assignments. Three interpreters stated they had invested in good quality equipment, a stable internet connection, and had adapted a suitable area in their home for RSI, which they claimed fulfilled technical requirements better than hubs. Few reasons were given for not working from home, and they referred to the excessive responsibility of depending on one’s home internet connection and equipment, or difficulties in work-life balance.

For those preferring to work from a hub or the event venue the main reason was the technical support provided, together with simultaneous interpreting consoles and the possibility of coordinating with their booth partner.

For those who only marked the event venue as their preferred location, the reasons most frequently expressed were the proximity to the speakers and being in a working environment.

As for those who preferred working in an office outside their home, convenience and separation of family life from work were the reasons adduced. Most respondents were based in Spain but, as mentioned, some were based in other markets. These results showed no correlation between market and preferred location for performing RSI.

4.7 RSI and the change in the relationship with stakeholders

Respondents were asked whether the relationship with the three main stakeholders in the interpreting process (clients, speakers and colleagues) had changed, in comparison with in-person interpreting. More than one option could be selected. The results are as follows:

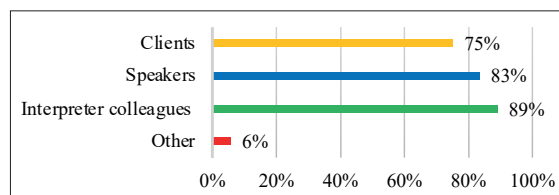


Figure 7. Relationship with the three main stakeholders.

Most respondents feel that the relationship with clients, speakers and colleagues has changed. In general terms, they attribute this to the loss of direct contact with these three stakeholder groups when working online, which influences their form of communication and interaction in comparison to in-person settings. Specifically, with regard to clients, the loss of opportunities for communication and networking is mentioned, the fact that assignments are offered with little advance notice, and attempts are made to negotiate lower remuneration.

With respect to speakers, the biggest change is loss of access to them in remote settings, meaning that it is impossible to consult them on terminological issues and obtain information or documentation. It was felt that the relationship of interpreters with speakers in RSI is more distant and that speakers are less aware of the interpreter's work, believing it to be mechanical. Little effort is made by speakers to improve sound quality.

As far as the relationship with colleagues is concerned, respondents indicate that coordination with booth partners is more difficult, particularly the handover in Zoom. The relationship with interpreters with other language combinations has also suffered.

4.8 Advantages and disadvantages of RSI in comparison with on-site interpreting

The following lists reflect the order of frequency of the topics mentioned by participants in response to open-ended questions.

Advantages:

- Convenience and flexibility of interpreting from home or another place of one's choice which improves quality of life, work-life balance, carbon footprint, use of resources.
- Saving time and effort in travelling to assignments, so more assignments can be accepted.
- Saving time and money for organisers, avoiding expenses incurred when hiring non-local interpreters.
- Ideal format for pandemic scenarios, guaranteeing continuity of professional activity.
- Shorter working hours as RSI meetings tend to be shorter and more concise.
- Access to assignments that would not be possible otherwise because of distance or lack of technical resources, especially for interpreters living far from main conference venues.
- RSI often reaches a wider audience than on-site interpreting.

Disadvantages:

- Lack of technical assistance, which increases interpreters' workload and likelihood of technical problems, especially:
 - poor sound quality from speakers using inadequate microphones;
 - coordination of handover.
- Lack of interaction with colleagues, clients and speakers, and of non-verbal communication.
- Loss of contact with participants makes interpreting seem like an automatic process and users tend to forget that there are interpreters at work as the booths are not visible.
- Little awareness about interpreters' copyright on their renditions. Recordings are often made and posted on the Internet or circulated without their permission.
- Greater cognitive load.
- Possible hearing disorders in the future.
- Solitary and alienating activity: the interpreter is alone to face technical and other problems.
- RSI from home involves working in a non-professional environment.
- Many different platforms with different technical requirements.
- Future working conditions may deteriorate due to increased competition.

4.9 Suggestions for solutions to problems detected

The majority insisted that the main solution to the various problems and disadvantages detected is to educate clients and speakers in advance, raising awareness about microphone quality (the need to use headphones with integrated microphones), the need to speak from a quiet location, to have a stable internet connection, and to be familiar with the platform and how the interpreting system works. In this sense, an awareness campaign on interpreters' rights was proposed.

As a solution for the coordination problems on Zoom, respondents insisted on the need for an interface for communication between interpreters, as is available on specific RSI platforms, and on the need for technical assistance throughout the assignment. With regard to sound quality, the sound transmission frequency on Zoom could be increased, as Zoom has a high-fidelity function. Increased contact with other interpreters was also mentioned in specific locations such as hubs to promote unity and defence of remote interpreting requirements.

5. Discussion

The sample was composed primarily of experienced interpreters in mid-career, who would logically be concerned with events that are shaping their professional future and willing to embrace ongoing changes in the profession. Most were affiliated to professional associations, which implies greater access to the guidelines and support offered by such associations during the pandemic.

Accordingly, there was a high level of RI in general being performed by these respondents, on a weekly or monthly basis, which would suggest that RSI is not a random or sporadic activity, as it may have been before the pandemic, or during the initial lockdown period, but has now become fully incorporated into their normal workflow. This said, it is also true that this finding may be due to the fact that interpreters who frequently perform RI were those most likely to respond to our questionnaire (cf. Section 3). Therefore, we cannot assert that this pattern is representative of the profession as a whole. However, it does indicate that a reasonably high proportion of the respondents perform RI on a regular basis and points to a trend amongst them.

It is interesting to note that the remote activity reported did not only involve simultaneous but also a considerable amount of consecutive interpreting. The current study and most of the survey questions are focused on RSI, but the fact that over 40% of respondents also perform remote consecutive is an interesting finding for future research.

Most references would seem to point to RI being primarily employed in short meetings with a reduced number of attendees (DG SCIC 2019; Cases Silverstone 2020; Mahyub Rayaa 2022) and, indeed, the results of this study support this as over 70% of respondents stated their average RSI assignment did not last longer than a half-day. However, some longer events were reported, even large international conferences completely on-line lasting several days and, in general, our results report a wide range of meeting types taking place with RSI. This could indicate an evolution from the first months of lockdown when only essential meetings were held, gradually extending to cover different meeting types. Such a finding may indicate that instead of disappearing once lockdown ended or being limited to small meetings, RSI is gaining ground and also being used as an alternative for all kinds of events, including large international conferences. Such a conclusion is tentative, however, as at the time of the study the pandemic was still ongoing. Comments would seem to indicate that the use of RSI has increased during each wave of the pandemic.

Another interesting finding is that 48% of respondents report that they prefer on-site interpreting to RSI and the remaining 52% is divided between those who actually prefer RSI or who may prefer it depending on the circumstances. 25% prefer a combination of on-site and RSI, which would seem to indicate a clear shift away from the pre-pandemic climate of rejection of RSI amongst interpreters and be indicative of a possible evolution not based exclusively on necessity. It would also suggest that these interpreters are reasonably satisfied with their working conditions in RSI, indicating that the worst fears have not become a reality and that the profession as a whole has been able to secure similar conditions in RSI to those achieved in on-site interpreting in terms of length of working day, number of interpreters, documentation, fees, etc. Over 86% of respondents reported that most work was done from their home and, indeed, over 40% reported that this was in fact their location of preference for RSI, clearly higher than those preferring a hub which, again, would seem to contrast with pre-pandemic opinions (Jiménez Serano 2019a). This finding, together with many of the freely expressed comments⁶, suggests that these interpreters have been assertive in creating a positive and technically sound environment in which to perform RSI at home when it became the only possible workplace, with meeting venues and hubs closed due to lockdown. There were also comments regarding the desirability of working from a hub as a way to overcome many of the disadvantages, which would not seem consistent with the fact that only 4 respondents marked “hub” as their preferred remote setting and 9 in combination with other settings. Perhaps, for most respondents, the advantages of working from home were greater than those of working from a hub.

The total predominance of Zoom as the most frequent platform for RSI was no doubt a foreseeable result. Before March 2020, in Europe Zoom was unknown as an interpreting platform and, arguably, in contrast to the USA, not even widely known as a videoconferencing platform. Initially, attention focused on the specific SIDPs as the means by which RSI could be enabled, and during the first months of the pandemic these platforms were constantly improving their functionalities vying with each other to become as interpreter-friendly and ISO-compliant as possible. The stakes were high as international institutions and large multinational organisations sought to continue business. However, such platforms were beyond the budget of many private market meetings. During the initial months of the pandemic, Zoom became one of the most widely used videoconferencing platforms in general and, as it had a low-cost, rudimentary simultaneous interpreting feature, clients began to request interpreting via Zoom. Two years after the beginning of the pandemic a process of natural selection would seem to have taken place in the private market, with over 70% of respondents in this study stating they use Zoom with maximum frequency, above all other platforms in all markets represented in the sample except Australia where Interpretify and Kudo were predominant. However, the number of respondents based in Australia was too low to be significant. It is true that this study reflects freelance interpreters working on the private market and not in institutional settings, which do use specific SIDPs (Pedrouzo González 2022).

6 Cf. Q22: <<https://figshare.com/s/9512c888638448992bd2>>.

This predominance of Zoom on the private market, a result also found by López González (2022), is possibly not only due to the high cost of SIDPs, but also to the fact that most interpreting clients now feel reasonably comfortable with Zoom and, importantly, because the sound quality is not lower than that offered by many SIDPs⁷. Although Zoom is not an SIDP, its RSI feature has gradually been refined so that two years after the onset of the pandemic a relay function has been added, together with a high-fidelity audio feature. Problems remain, however, notably the lack of technical support and lack of contact with booth partners necessitating some form of back channel for interaction outside the system, often consisting of WhatsApp contact involving another device. This back channel is necessary for interpreters to listen to booth partners, to offer help if needed, to step in if technical problems arise and particularly for the handover process. This extra channel increases cognitive load, which can affect concentration. Difficulties with the handover function due to lack of contact are consistently repeated by respondents in the freely expressed comments. Indeed, this issue was flagged as one of the main current disadvantages of RSI on platforms such as Zoom and there would appear to be a wide consensus amongst interpreters about the need to resolve this shortcoming, beyond the current *ad hoc* measures they have devised themselves.

According to our data, one of the problems associated with RSI via Zoom, namely lack of technical support, seems to have been partially addressed through *ad hoc* solutions applied by users and interpreters themselves. Respondents claimed that when working on Zoom or other platforms that do not offer technical support, in an overwhelming majority of cases, such support was available either “always” or “sometimes”. The study does not explore the nature of that support, but its availability would seem to point to pragmatic solutions being sought to cover evolving needs, shaping a clear trend. Evidently, Zoom is not compliant with specifications included in the International Standard 24019:2022, but the existence of such a standard is a benchmark to aspire to.

Given that the study addresses the initial phases of RSI under the difficult circumstances of the pandemic, it is encouraging to note that almost 60% of respondents have received some form of training. As could be expected, most of this training is in the form of short workshops offered by the SIDPs. Indeed, during the initial months of the pandemic the main specialised platforms offered free, online training sessions. At that time, many interpreters had time to spare and were possibly apprehensive about and aware of the need to prepare for the paradigm change that was taking shape in the profession. The high level of uptake reflected in these results points, once again, to an assertive professional group, seeking to respond actively and pre-emptively to their new needs.

Not surprisingly, the advantages of RSI listed by the respondents include those widely mentioned in documents published in professional circles (Bond 2019; Tejada Delgado 2019), such as greater flexibility, time saving, improved work-life balance, reduced carbon footprint, and the possibility to accept more

7 The results of this study regarding sound quality will be addressed in further depth in a future article.

assignments in less time, indicating that this is indeed the case in practice. Indeed, the time and energy saved on travelling to assignment venues was the one advantage most frequently mentioned by the respondents, which is consistent with their preference for working from home.

As regards the disadvantages noted, again they were consistent with the literature for the most part (ITI 2019; DG SCIC 2019; Cases Silverstone 2020), focusing particularly on technical problems and lack of professional contact with booth partners. Importantly, lack of social contact and interaction with colleagues was also highlighted in many comments. A technical problem that was mentioned repeatedly was poor sound quality of speakers' equipment. In in-person interpreting, the speakers' equipment is provided and controlled by the organisers and/or technicians. In RI, there is often no such control and speakers often use the microphones embedded in laptops or other devices, which do not produce sufficiently good sound quality for interpreting. When asked how such shortcomings could be overcome, respondents repeatedly suggested training, not only for interpreters but also for speakers, particularly with reference to the quality of their microphone.

Comments also hinted at depersonalization in RSI and some of its consequences, such as the tendency of users to forget the interpreters' existence even more than in on-site settings because they are not physically visible. Respondents suggested that this factor makes interpreting seem automatic and users consider them to be "machines", "a voice", "a computer programme" and "a robot". These comments are consistent with the service provider being alienated and isolated at the end of the supply chain, as mentioned above (cf. Section 1). Such misconceptions about the nature of interpreting have always been an issue in private market settings, and it would seem that RSI potentially aggravates such misconceptions, reflecting characteristics of the "gig economy" mentioned by Fantinuoli (2018a) and García Crecente (2019).

This feeling of alienation and depersonalization is reinforced in comments about the way in which relationships with the main stakeholders have changed, with particular emphasis on lack of interaction with colleagues.

6. Conclusions

The aim of this study was to explore the perceptions of interpreters with regard to RSI. Abundant information was collated regarding the frequency and format of remote assignments, location of performance, preferences, training, together with the perception of advantages and disadvantages. From these results it is clear that RSI is not a temporary solution for a crisis scenario but a consolidated format coexisting with in-person interpreting and having specific advantages and shortcomings.

The study offers an image of an assertive, mid-career, female professional working on the private market, mainly on Zoom from a home environment which has been duly adapted. She has a certain degree of technical assistance and appreciates not having to travel for assignments. The problems highlighted are specific and mainly refer to speakers using substandard microphones, inade-

quate provision of a function for the handover process with booth partners and a sense of isolation due to lack of direct contact with other stakeholders.

Wider comments would seem to place professionals in the context of an increasingly technology-based working environment, with interpreters providing a service in isolation at the end of a supply chain although taking pre-emptive measures to offset the inherent disadvantages of such a situation. Few respondents depict themselves as passive victims of an inevitable situation. Such clear assertiveness could perhaps be attributed to the strong professional socialization of conference interpreters in general and our subjects in particular, together with the clear leadership of organisations such as AIIC and DG-SCIC.

Hopefully, such results can contribute to reflect the huge and almost daily change in conference interpreting practices at a crucial time in the evolution of the history of the interpreting profession.

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