

# Preparation strategies used by American Sign Language-English interpreters to render President Barack Obama's inaugural address

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## Abstract

*A fundamental principle held by professional American Sign Language-English interpreters is the critical importance of preparing for assignments; however, neither preparation strategies nor their efficacy have been studied in depth. For this study, six experienced ASL-English conference interpreters were interviewed about the preparation process they used to render President Barack Obama's 2009 inaugural address into ASL. The participants were given the full script of Obama's speech and 20 minutes of preparation time. After completing their interpretations, the participants engaged in a retrospective verbal report regarding their preparation strategies. The descriptive findings suggest that even ASL-English interpreters with experience in conference settings do not have standard strategies for preparing with written material, especially when interpreting a dense text under time constraints. A systematic approach to teaching preparation may improve the quality of the interpretations of scripted speeches, and other discourse genres, by ASL-English interpreters.*

## Introduction

After 50 years of practice in the United States, the profession of American Sign Language-English interpretation has yet to answer the question of how to effectively prepare for interpreting assignments. No standard text or curricula exist on preparation techniques of ASL-English interpreters. Students in interpreter

education programs may (or may not) receive instruction on preparation strategies and such strategies are not grounded in evidence-based research. Professional ASL-English interpreters frequently report that preparation is a fundamental aspect of their work; however, they are unable to identify methods that are widely accepted as best practice. Further, scholars have not documented preparation strategies of experienced ASL-English interpreters, nor have studies been conducted to determine their effectiveness. Consequently, despite the general agreement that preparation is an integral component of professional ASL-English interpreting, there is virtually no evidence of recurring and intentionally applied strategies taught or used by interpreters, nor has the efficacy of strategies been verified.

Changing markets have increasingly led to signed language interpreters working in environments marked by formal discourse patterns and information-dense speeches read from prepared texts. Increasingly, Deaf professionals who work in specialized fields of academia, healthcare, and technical disciplines hire designated interpreters (Hauser *et al.* 2008). In light of these shifting demands, the lack of research on preparation for interpreting assignments represents a critical gap in the optimization of professional practice. Evidence-based data and the relevant pedagogical implications for an effective approach to preparation may lead to advancements in both the practice of professional interpreting as well as improvements in the training of interpreting students.

The present study focuses on the strategies employed by interpreters who prepared to interpret a highly scripted political speech working under significant time constraints. Six experienced ASL-English interpreters were given 20 minutes to prepare with the full script of President Barack Obama's 2009 inaugural address and after concluding their interpretations, engaged in a retrospective verbal report regarding their preparation strategies. This study aimed at achieving a better understanding of the strategies used by experienced ASL-English interpreters when preparing to interpret an information-dense written speech under time-constrained conditions. Data obtained were subsequently compared in order to identify recurring, consistently mentioned strategies, as well as to verify the impact the latter had on the final product of interpretation.

## 1. Background

ASL-English interpreters, just as spoken language interpreters, work in a variety of settings and the materials they receive in advance of assignments vary widely. Interpreters may have access to agendas, notes, presentation slides, outlines, brochures, or nothing at all. In their search for preparatory materials, interpreters may turn to the Internet, a valuable source of information if used in a directed manner and with discretion (Ala-Antti 2003; Choi 2005).

Some ASL-English interpreter educators advocate the use of discourse mapping to prepare for assignments (Winston/Monikowski 2005; Witter-Merithew 2001), an approach to text analysis designed to facilitate the process of moving from a given source language to the target language. The mapping process is in-

tended to lead to a target message that includes accurate content (e.g., themes, topics, events), appropriate context (e.g. register, setting, goals), and equivalent linguistic forms (e.g. vocabulary, transitions). In discourse mapping, interpreters create a visual representation (i.e. a map) of the text, in which the relations between content, context, and linguistic form are illustrated through pictures, symbols, and words. This approach is useful for highlighting the multi-layered nature of interpretation; however, its effectiveness in interpreting practice has not been thoroughly investigated.

Another approach that recently has been gaining attention within ASL-English interpreting studies is based on Karasek's (1979) model of vocational demands. In their Demand-Control Schema, Dean and Pollard (2013) identify four categories of demands that interpreters face which may affect the efficacy of their output: 1) environmental, 2) interpersonal, 3) paralinguistic, and 4) intrapersonal. Dean and Pollard (*ibid.*) argue that interpreters can make decisions and take actions (controls) for managing the demands. The task of considering potential demands in a given text is *de facto* a preparation strategy that may lead to specific solutions for accurately rendering the source language into the target language. This is another intriguing approach but further investigation is needed to assess its efficacy as it pertains to preparation strategies.

The strategic and conscious decision to make omissions in interpretations has been suggested by Napier (2001). Although not considered a preparation strategy per se, omitting information almost invariably requires decision-making on the part of the interpreter. With strategic omissions, it is suggested that interpreters purposefully decide to eliminate specific information present in the source message as they construct the target message, with the aim of preserving the overall quality of the interpretation (Wadensjö 1998).

Demers (2005) claims that interpreters' ability to predict potentially problematic factors involved in an interpreting assignment increases with experience, while their need for preparation time decreases. Unfortunately, neither the identified strategies nor the claims about the impact of experience have been empirically verified by the author or subsequent researchers. It is worth noting, however, Demers also mentions reviewing written materials pertaining to an assignment among the preparation strategies. Perhaps not surprisingly, the most significant advances in the discussion on ASL-English interpreters' preparation have been made in legal interpreting studies: indeed, legal settings often require document processing using multiple documents for preparation. (e.g. González *et al.* 1991; Mathers 1999, 2007; Russell/Hale 2008).

### 1.1 Written speeches

One of the most challenging assignments for interpreters is interpreting formal written speeches that are read aloud (Galaz 2011; Knox 2006). A written speech is often the product of many hours of organizing thoughts, ideas, and wording into a fluid message designed to make a specific impact on an audience. The words in written speeches tend to be longer, more abstract, and of a higher register than

the words in naturally spoken language (Al-Annti 2003). The sentences of written language are usually more complex and contain considerably fewer repetitions, which make them difficult to understand and interpret upon delivery (Knox 2006; Russo *et al.* 2006). Furthermore, when reading a written text, speakers may not use the prosodic patterns of natural, spoken, impromptu discourse that help listeners – and ultimately interpreters – analyze the structure and meaning of the content (Varantola 1980). Other challenges in scripted speeches include the high incidence of personal names, place names, numbers and figures, abbreviations and acronyms, direct quotations, metaphors, and historical and cultural references (Al-Annti 2003). Thus, live television interpreting is regarded as one of the most difficult and stressful forms of interpreting (Amato 2002; Jiménez Serano 2011; Kurz/Pöchhacker 1995; Pöchhacker 1997). As a result, the task of interpreting formal written speeches draws considerably on the cognitive resources of the interpreter. See table 1 for examples of challenges in President Obama’s 2009 inaugural address.

TYPE OF CHALLENGE	SOURCE LANGUAGE SEGMENT
Formal register	<i>My fellow citizens. In reaffirming the greatness of our nation, we understand that greatness is never a given.</i>
Place names	[...] <i>Concord and Gettysburg; Normandy and Khe Sahn.</i>
Metaphors	[...] <i>every so often the oath is taken amidst gathering clouds and raging storms.</i>
Direct quotations	<i>Let it be told to the future world that in the depth of winter, when nothing but hope and virtue could survive [...] that the city and the country, alarmed at one common danger, came forth to meet it.</i>
Historical and cultural references	<i>Recall that earlier generations faced down fascism and communism not just with missiles and tanks, but with sturdy alliances and enduring convictions.</i>

Table 1. Types and examples of interpreting challenges contained within President Obama’s 2009 inaugural address

It is worth noting that the Deaf community in the United States share some cultural knowledge and experiences with hearing individuals who grew up in the United States, thus ASL-English interpreters may not face as challenging a task in rendering certain U.S. historical and cultural references.

### 1.2 Comprehension of written source texts

A crucial aspect of interpreting source language discourse, whether spoken or written, is comprehension of the message (Holz-Mänttari 1984). Two of the most widely used frameworks of comprehension, the *construction-integration model* (Kintsch 1988) and the *structure-building framework* (Gernsbacher 1990), main-

tain that comprehension largely depends on the activation of pre-existing information stored in long-term memory. A complex and highly interactive process, comprehension entails the transformation of information into logical propositions, activation of prior knowledge, and integration of both to produce a mental representation of the present content (Gile 1992, 1995; Johnson-Laird 1983; van Dijk/Kintsch 1983). Understanding a text requires study, which in turn depends on the cognitive and meta-cognitive skills through which individuals focus their attention, encode the material, monitor their own comprehension, and, should the latter fail, take repairing action (Armbruster/Anderson 1981).

Successful comprehension of written texts is achieved through a variety of techniques. An interpreter may engage in “conceptual preparation” (Gile 2002) by taking notes on topic-related materials about known and unfamiliar concepts and terms (Bosch 2012; Liu 2008; Matyssek 2006). In the first reading, an interpreter may divide the text into units, adding slashes at key points to focus eye movements on shorter text segments, thereby reducing the time and processing capacity required for comprehension. According to Gile (1995, 2002), note-taking may reduce the time required to retrieve ideas, with a consequent decrease in the required cognitive memory effort. Mikkelsen<sup>1</sup> suggests that notes serve as a type of external memory storage and a learning aid to organize and synthesize ideas, while also providing a means to rehearse and reinforce the content. Comprehension techniques also include discussion of terminological questions with experts or fellow interpreters and the creation of glossaries, which will typically contain relevant information schematized in a format that is easy to consult (Galaz 2011).

Al-Antti (2003) applies Buzan’s (1974/1983) two-stage study method of *preparation* and *application* to interpreting. Preparation begins with examining the length of the source text in order to estimate and subsequently schedule the amount of time available for working through the material. According to Buzan, scheduling provides a terrain for alternating between chunks of information and taking quick breaks to allow the material to be stored in memory. The application phase consists of four steps. First, the individual conducts an *overview* by leafing through the material looking for key points. Using a visual guide such as a pen, pencil, or even a finger during the scanning stage is recommended as a means of reducing a wandering eye or mind. The next step is the *preview*, which entails examining items not covered in the overview, with special attention to beginnings and endings of paragraphs and sections. The third step is the *inview*, in which particularly challenging passages are revisited for further analysis. Finally, the learner does a *review*, going through the remaining unexamined chunks and reconsidering the sections. According to Al-Antti (2003), interpreters may adapt Buzan’s preparation and application method according to their time constraints. Al-Antti’s study, however, lacks empirical validation. Further investigation is therefore required in order to verify Buzan’s method’s efficacy in interpreters’ preparation.

1 Mikkelsen, H. Presentation on “Teaching note-taking”, given at the Symposium on Teaching Consecutive Interpreting, Portland, Oregon, June 12-14, 2005.

### 1.3 Mental preparation

Along with comprehension, the importance of mental preparation as a determinant of performance has been demonstrated in a variety of field and experimental settings, such as in athletic performance (Silva/Stevens 2001; Weinberg 1981; Weinberg *et al.* 1985). As far as interpreting is concerned, Nolan (2005: 18) goes further than mental preparation and states that performance in conference interpreting depends upon “sustained mental alertness”. No research studies appear to have been conducted on mental preparation as a readiness technique for signed language interpreters.

Studies on athletes and mental preparation report that successful performance is enhanced by various strategies, such as *imagery* (Madigan *et al.* 1992; Orlick/Partington 1988) and *positive self-talk* (Bertollo *et al.* 2009). Other studies suggest the effectiveness of coping strategies, including *time prioritization* and *anxiety management* (e.g. Gould *et al.* 1993). Other scholars refer to a distinct process in athletic preparation known as “psyching up” (Biddle 1985: 67) (e.g. *listening to positive statements* through headphones), which has been shown to improve athletic performance (Miller/Donohue 2003). Another concept used in sports is that of *mental toughness*, a process meant to foster such attributes as self-belief, motivation, and focus (Weinberg *et al.* 1985). Techniques to build mental toughness include making reinforcing statements of personal ability and self-efficacy (Dolan *et al.* 2011) and employing mental imagery (Weinberg 1981). Overall, studies of mental preparation in athletes show a positive and significant effect on performance (Driskell *et al.* 1994).

### 1.4 Studies on interpreters' preparation

Studies measuring the efficacy of preparation among spoken language interpreters are few in number and the results are mixed. In an early study of 12 professional interpreters, Anderson (1979) found no significant effect of background information on interpreting performance. Participants were provided either with a transcript of the speech, a summary, or no information. Interpreting performance was measured by the degree of intelligibility of the target speeches. The results were questionable because of the small sample size and the high variability among the participants.

In a later study of 12 professional interpreters, Lamberger-Felber (2003) investigated the effect of transcript availability in three conditions: one group received a transcript of the speech and had time to prepare with it, another group had the transcript but were not given preparation time, and the third group had no transcript at all. Interpreters in both transcript conditions exhibited a higher percentage of correctly interpreted names and numbers and fewer errors and omissions compared to the interpreters in the no-transcript condition. Again, variability within this small sample was high, making it difficult to generalize the results to a larger population of interpreters.

Galaz (2011) examined the effects of preparation on accuracy, omissions, and ear-to-voice-span for interpretations of scientific discourse delivered by 14 in-

interpreting students who were Spanish L1 speakers working into English. The interaction between preparation and perceived level of difficulty was significant: indeed, there was a greater degree of accuracy, fewer omissions, and a longer ear-to-voice-span in the deliveries of interpreting students who prepared for their task than in the interpretations of those who did not.

In Stone's (2009) study on hearing and deaf translators and interpreters who provided interpretations of television news in the UK, participants were given the script of the newscast in advance of their interpretations. Deaf translators and interpreters immediately started rehearsing their interpretations in British Sign Language, until they were satisfied with their comprehension and rendering of the material, indicating the importance of rehearsing an interpretation as a means of preparation.

We have drawn from a number of studies both within interpretation and in other disciplines to learn what techniques may prove fruitful in the preparation process. Note-taking, positive self-talk, rehearsing, and conscious omissions are some possible strategies for interpreters who face cognitive and physical performance pressure in their work, especially in preparing for challenging assignments such as highly scripted speeches, strategies which seem applicable to both signed language and spoken language interpreters. The next section presents the material and the applied methodology.

## 2. The study

The present study examines ASL-English interpreters' preparation strategies prior to interpreting President Obama's 2009 inaugural address by collecting their retrospective reports and describing the strategies used in their preparation.

### 2.1 Participants

Six ASL-English interpreters participated in this study. Each interpreter possessed national interpreting certification and had 7 to 30 years of conference interpreting experience. The participants included two interpreters from Canada and four interpreters from the United States (5 females, 1 male). Five of the participants were non-native signers. Participants' age ranged from 27 to 53 years, with a mean age of 43. One participant was African American; the other five were Caucasian. The participants were paid \$250 (USD) each for their participation in the study.

### 2.2 Materials

The stimulus was a video recording of President Obama's inaugural address delivered in Washington D.C. on January 20, 2009. The video recording was presented to the participants on a laptop computer with audio speakers. Participants' interpretations were recorded using a digital video camera and mini-DVD tapes.

Preparation materials consisted of a written script of President Barack Obama's inaugural address, blank paper, a pen, and an English language dictionary. In addition, the researchers used a retrospective verbal report interview protocol (See Appendix). It should be noted that this study of ASL-English interpreters' preparation of President Obama's 2009 inaugural address is part of a larger, in progress study of spoken and signed language interpretations of the address. In a forthcoming paper, we provide results of a cross-linguistic analysis of interpretations of the speech.

### 2.3 Procedures

At recruitment, interpreters were told that they would be simultaneously interpreting an 18-minute formal address from spoken English into American Sign Language. When they arrived on site, participants were informed that the formal address was Barack Obama's 2009 inaugural address. After signing consent forms, each participant was given a full written script of Obama's inaugural address and 20 minutes to prepare for the English to ASL interpretation. The participants were instructed to prepare in the manner they would use with other high-profile English to ASL interpretation assignments. They were provided with an English dictionary<sup>2</sup>, blank paper, and a pen but were not given access to a computer or the Internet.<sup>3</sup>

After the 20-minute preparation period, each participant rendered her/his interpretation of the speech while being video recorded. Following the interpretation, each interpreter participated in an open-ended, guided interview in which they were asked about the strategies used in preparing for the interpretation task. Individually, interpreters were first asked to describe their preparation processes and to reflect on its appropriateness and effectiveness, secondly what would they do to prepare differently if they had another opportunity to interpret the same speech, and lastly in what ways their preparation aided their interpretations. The interviews were conducted in English and video recorded using a digital camera.

### 2.4 Data analysis

The video recorded data was transcribed into written English and the researchers separately reviewed both the transcripts and the digital video of the immediate retrospective verbal reports. The strategies of the interpreters were analyzed in two ways: a) identifying and categorizing the participants' comments related to preparation, and b) determining preparation patterns among the interpreters.

2 ASL does not have a written form and ASL dictionaries in print do not yet adequately capture the lexicon, thus we provided participants with an English dictionary only.

3 We disallowed use of the Internet for this study to re-create conditions of spoken language interpreters who received the script 20 minutes prior to the live inaugural address in 2009.



### 3. Results

The results are presented in chronological order paralleling the tasks the participants were asked to complete. The first section addresses the results of the question to interpreters regarding their preparation prior to arrival. The second section addresses how they used the 20-minute preparation period at the study site. The questions addressed their process and the use of the script, blank paper, pens, and dictionary. Section 3.3 reports the participants' responses to the question of what, if anything, they would do differently given the opportunity to prepare to interpret the speech again.

#### 3.1 Preparation prior to arrival

Table 2 indicates the preparation strategies participants reported engaging in before they arrived at the interpreting (research) site. These strategies were spontaneously self-reported by participants in the post-interpreting interview when prompted to recall preparation strategies they used before arrival.

REPORTED STRATEGIES	INT 1	INT 2	INT 3	INT 4	INT 5	INT 6	TOTAL BY STRATEGY
Reported no preparation strategies conducted prior to arrival		•	•*	•*			3
Considered professional attire <sup>4</sup>	•				•		2
Considered self-care (e.g. sufficient sleep, food, low stress)	•						1
Considered audience	•		•				2
Engaged in mental games or synonym practice						•	1
Engaged in positive self-talk				•			1
TOTAL BY INTERPRETER	3	1	1	2	1	1	

Table 2. Interpreter (INT) preparation strategies prior to arrival at interpreting research site  
\*[Note: Interpreter initially reported no preparation, but when prompted, mentioned a preparation activity.]

4 Attire is an important consideration for signed language interpreters as they are highly visible to audience members as they work. In addition, signed language interpreters

### 3.2 Use of the 20-minute preparation time

The following section reports on how interpreters used their 20-minute preparation time, including their use of the materials (script, blank paper, pen, and dictionary), as well as their descriptions of their preparation process.

#### 3.2.1 Use of materials

Four of the interpreters chose to use the English dictionary during preparation, with two reporting they looked up the word “citizens”<sup>5</sup>. Two other interpreters reported that they looked up “a few words”. Three interpreters made use of the blank paper and pen: two wrote down words that might be difficult to finger-spell, one made notes about “spatial information”, one wrote down names of places, and one drew a visual image of what she considered to be the overarching message of the source text. One participant stated that using the paper would have taken extra time and been a distraction to the preparation process.

#### 3.2.2 Strategies interpreters reported using during 20-minute preparation period

Strategies reported being used by more than one interpreter during the 20-minute preparation period are presented in table 3. Notably, three interpreters stated that they did not finish reading the script in the time allowed. All three reported that they had intended to read through the script at least once, but the allotted preparation time ran out before this was accomplished. The three interpreters who read the script completely also reported using more strategies compared to the other participants.

Although INT 2 did not employ many of the strategies used by others, she reported that reading even part of the script gave her a foundation for the speech: “What it was and where it was going”. She also described making connections between ideas as she read.

One-time reported strategies (INT 4 or INT 5) fell into two categories: those related to production and those related to determining meaning and intent. Examples of individual strategies related to production included: a) signing (rehearsing) the beginning of the speech because openings are often challenging, b) minimizing fingerspelling because the speech would be televised<sup>6</sup>, and c) making notes about how to use the signing space around the interpreter to reference ideas. Examples of individual strategies that were related to determining meaning and intent included: a) attempting to remember the speech from the original

conventionally wear clothing that contrasts with their skin tone for the highest degree of visibility.

5 The English word “citizen” does not have a standard correspondent in ASL. We presume the interpreters were looking up the word to seek alternative ways of expressing this concept in ASL.

REPORTED STRATEGIES	INT 1	INT 2	INT 3	INT 4	INT 5	INT 6	TOTAL BY STRATEGIES
Read completely through script at least twice				•	•	•	3
Highlighted key words and phrases on script with pen		•		•	•	•	4
Wrote notes directly on script					•	•	2
Identified lists of things or ideas in script (e.g. used “listing conventions” by pointing to items on fingers)			•	•	•		3
Identified metaphors					•	•	2
Translated certain segments into ASL (rehearsal)	•			•		•	3
Identified “dense” terms	•				•		2
Identified goals/themes of speech				•	•		2
Considered conscious omissions	•			•	•		3
Considered impact on audience			•	•	•		3
TOTAL BY INTERPRETER	3	1	2	7	9	5	

Table 3. Preparation strategies reported by more than one interpreter (INT)

broadcast, b) finding over-arching images that could facilitate comprehension during rapid speech, c) highlighting parts that were memorable, d) considering how to convey English alliteration, and e) reflecting on the ways President Obama inspired the audience.

6 Fingerspelling can be more difficult to perceive in a two-dimensional format.

None of the interpreters reported using the script during the interpretation. One interpreter reported that she had intended to refer to it while interpreting to access a quote in the text, but the font size of the script made it impossible for her to see it while interpreting.

### 3.3 Strategies if the task were to be repeated with additional preparation time

All the participants reported they would prepare differently if the experiment were to be repeated with additional preparation time. The desire to access the Internet was common among the interpreters. Four of the six participants specifically stated that they would listen to a recording of the speech to get a sense of its timing, rhythm, and pacing. More specifically, they mentioned that they would mark pauses in the script based on the recording, as this would be beneficial to know when they had additional time to construct or produce their interpretations. Four participants stated they would work through the document carefully and think more deeply about the historical and political context of the speech. Three participants added that they would consider the themes and intent of the speech more carefully. Two participants mentioned discourse mapping and translating passages into ASL as possible additional preparation strategies. Other strategies mentioned by only one interpreter are given below:

- "Contact a colleague with experience".
- "Develop a parallel speech meaningful to D/deaf audience [...]".
- "Consider how the speech made me feel".
- "Videotape myself and watch it".
- "Use spatial structure more effectively".
- "Think about technical aspects of interpretations".
- "Think about idiomatic language and its emotion and impact".
- "Not move to the next paragraph until I had the current paragraph tackled, then practice all preceding paragraphs together".

Three participants (INT 4, INT 5, and INT 6) said they would prepare in the same way if the conditions were the same. It is worth noting that this response came from the three participants who were able to read through the entire script and exhibited the highest number of reported strategies (table 3). However, after stating they would prepare in the same way, they also volunteered additional ideas they might use, including reading more quickly and not getting mired in the details of the text. The three participants who did not finish reading the script did not say they would prepare the same way. One said she would ask deaf ASL experts about possible translations for some of the phrases, and one of the Canadian interpreters stated that she would want more information about some of the points in the speech related to American history.

Overall, the interpreters who did not complete a reading of the script were less positive about their performance than the three who read through the script at least twice. One said she would take the interpreting assignment only if she could work as a team with a deaf interpreter, another said she would not be

“jumping up and down” to accept this assignment, and the third stated her interpretation of the speech was not representative of her work.

### 3.4 Summary

Few distinct commonalities emerged in the reports from participants regarding their preparation strategies. Of note is the lack of a standard approach for preparing, both in advance of arriving for the interpreting task and during the preparation immediately prior to the interpretation itself. The main findings are summarized below:

- Interpreters did not have similar strategies for how to prepare before arriving at the interpreting assignment (experiment) site.
- Interpreters' use of materials (i.e. script, blank paper, pen, dictionary) varied.
- Interpreters did not use the script or notes during the interpretation.
- Each interpreter described the preparation process in different ways. No mention was made of standard or best practices or “routines” for this type of interpreting. All seemed to be speaking from experience, but not from a learned, systematic approach to preparation.
- Only one strategy (i.e. highlight and underline important word/phrases in the script) was mentioned by more than half of the interpreters.
- The three interpreters who read through the speech at least two times employed more preparation strategies and were more positive about their preparation and interpreting performance than the three interpreters who did not manage to read the full speech.
- All interpreters mentioned that it was a difficult interpreting task, especially referring to the density of the original speech.

### 4. Discussion

Results indicate that interpreters did not consistently use techniques for preparation described in the preparation literature for ASL-English or spoken language interpreting. The 20-minute preparation period did not allow for discourse mapping, but two interpreters mentioned this approach as a strategy they would use if more preparation time were allowed. The approach of using Demand-Control Schema was not identified, although some interpreters did comment on some of the intrapersonal demands and possible controls.

Interpreters reported difficulty with areas generally identified as being potentially challenging in Interpreting Studies in general, such as place names, metaphors, quoted material, historical and cultural references (Al-Antti 2003). However, strategies that are routinely taught and used by spoken language conference interpreters (e.g. note-taking, marking the script, rehearsal, glossary development, and consulting with colleagues) were not consistently mentioned by this group of highly skilled ASL-English conference interpreters. All of the interpreters commented on the challenges presented by the density of the informa-

tional content in the text. Comments were made about wishing to look up additional information regarding certain historical events, as well as using research to better understand the context of references in the speech. Interpreters also found it difficult not to get “mired in the details” and, given the density of the speech, half were prepared to make strategic conscious omissions.

As far as comprehension was concerned, no standard list of specific preparation strategies emerged from the interpreters’ reports. Only one participant used the strategy of taking notes on the blank paper. The most common approach reported by the interpreters was underlining or otherwise highlighting words/phrases on the script. This was not, however, considered as a strategy applied with a specific, systematic purpose in mind. Rehearsal was used by a few of the participants, but was not mentioned specifically in relation to comprehension or memory.

Four of the interpreters made reference to mental preparation conducted either before or during the preparation period. Two referenced positive self-talk during the 20-minute preparation period, one mentioned her intent to be physically and emotionally well prepared (by eating and sleeping well and keeping stress low), and another participant mentioned that she engaged in “brain games” to keep her mind active and quick in the days before the interpretation. Again, there was no evidence of a standard or consistent approach among the participants in terms of mental preparation, either before or during the interpreting task.

## 5. Conclusion

The present study aimed at learning whether there were commonalities among the strategies used by the interpreters and how certain strategies aided the interpretations. To our knowledge, this is the first study that examined preparation strategies for a formal, scripted text by ASL-English interpreters through the use of retrospective verbal reports elicited by guided interviews. It is noteworthy that the interpreters reported no standard approaches for intentional and systematic preparation. Although there were similarities in some of the strategies, a common approach did not emerge. One potential explanation for the variation in interpreters’ preparation is the lack of standardized training or textbooks for ASL-English interpreters on preparing for formal, scripted speeches.

Textbooks and training on note-taking as a preparation strategy exist for interpreters working between two spoken languages; however, this is not the case for ASL-English interpreters. Given the challenges of interpreting formal, scripted speeches, this is an area that deserves the attention of researchers, with the goal of establishing a set of preparation techniques and standards to be incorporated into the pedagogical material used in interpreter education. It is critical for interpreters to learn how to effectively interpret cognitively demanding texts, which tax the linguistic, cognitive, and emotional capacities of the practitioner. Without a standard set of evidence-based practices, interpreters may continue to underperform in these settings, compromising the effectiveness of the interpretation available for deaf individuals.

We suggest that interpreters may benefit from standard, evidence-based instruction about preparation strategies. This instruction might include the properties of a variety of texts, how to identify those properties, and how to address those properties in preparation. Moreover, interpreters could be taught about the role of motivation and background knowledge in preparing, as well as techniques of mental practice. Additionally, interpreters would benefit from knowing why, when, and how to use particular preparation strategies. Finally, we suggest that students and interpreters should learn specific strategies for preparation under a variety of circumstances. A systematic approach to teaching preparation may serve to improve the quality of the interpretations of scripted speeches by ASL-English interpreters.

The results of this study offer an initial snapshot of preparation strategies reported by highly skilled, experienced ASL-English interpreters. Despite its contribution to filling this gap in research, the present study has evident limitations, the most significant of which being size of the participants' sample. Due to the experimental conditions, interpreters did not have access to information they might use when preparing to interpret a live speech, including contact with colleagues and Internet access for listening to the speech and looking up historical references, maps, and other resources available online. Finally, this study explored what interpreters *reported* they did for preparation after interpreting, which may not accurately reflect what they actually did.

The primary aim of this study was to identify and document preparation strategies used by highly experienced and competent interpreters when preparing to render a formal scripted speech under time-constrained conditions. Main findings include the lack of a standardized approach to preparation among ASL-English interpreters. Further research is needed on this topic, and such research has the potential to positively influence interpreting education and practice, and most importantly, improve the quality of interpretations of formal, scripted speeches.

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## Appendix A

### Retrospective Interview Questions

1. Could you please describe the process you went through to prepare for the interpretation?
  - a. What, if anything, did you do in advance of your arrival?
  - b. In what ways did you use the script for preparation, and during the interpretation?
  - c. Did you use the blank paper? The dictionary? In what way?
2. If you were to prepare again, what would you do the same, and what, if anything, would you do differently?
3. In what ways did your preparation aid your interpretation?