

## THE IMPORTANCE OF WORKING CONDITIONS FOR INTERPRETERS

<sup>1</sup>Lina Farsia and <sup>2</sup>Hanum Muziatun Nahriah

<sup>1</sup>Universitas Muhammadiyah Aceh, Banda Aceh, Indonesia

<sup>2</sup>PT. NIRAS INDONESIA, Jakarta, Indonesia

\*Corresponding author: [lina.farsia@unmuha.ac.id](mailto:lina.farsia@unmuha.ac.id)

### ABSTRACT

This paper discusses about the importance of working conditions for interpreters. A literature review is used as an approach for this paper. For the past years, the employers have not taken the working conditions for interpreters into account. This paper mentions three aspects of working conditions that have to be paid full attention in order for the interpreters to do their job professionally: physical wise, emotional wise, and financial wise. The employers needs to provide these three aspects for the interpreters to produce good outcome.

KEYWORDS: *Interpreters, Working Conditions.*

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### INTRODUCTION

The topics regarding interpreting have been deliberated from many different aspects and points of view, such as the validity and reliability of the messages being interpreted, skills of an interpreter, note-taking skills, and flexibility or modes carried on among others (Christoffels, De Groot, & Kroll, 2006; Grbić, & Pöllabauer, 2006; Shang, & Xie, 2020; Trisnawati & Netta, 2020; Yamada, 2018). Consequently, in this literature review, the authors would like to discuss about the environment of working conditions for interpreters. This topic is regarded imperative for those who consider themselves an interpreter, as most people will consider all possibilities of their working circumstances before they start working. The person might take the safety of working environment, the physical wise, emotional wise and certainly financial wise into account. The conclusion will be drawn to sum up this literature review.



## THE WORKING CONDITIONS FOR INTERPRETERS

Interpreting is not translating, and it is frequently misunderstood that interpreters are also translators. This occurs due to public is deficient in knowledge, hence, they become unaware about the distinction between interpreters and translators. The official definition of interpreting according to ASTM International (2015) is: "The process of first fully understanding, analyzing, and processing a spoken or signed message and then faithfully rendering it into another spoken or signed language" (2089-15, 3.1.1.)

An interpreter translates spoken words in certain contexts from one language to another. An interpreter is also demanded to deliver on-time presentation, which is onerous due to the time limitation. Apart from it, there are some factors that strongly affect the performance of interpreters because it is carried out in real time, such as time constraint, problematic contexts of communication, technical source settings, and good environmental place conditions, among others.

In addition to that, in every working environment, an employee needs to feel safe at work. For instance, doctors need to take care of themselves before taking care of the patients or else they might mistakenly diagnose the diseases, or as flight controllers should be in healthy and safe working conditions or else they might provide incorrect information to the pilots that will cause plane crashes. Similar to interpreters, they also need to be in excellent and safe circumstances to interpret professionally; otherwise, faults will easily slip from their tongues. For example, if they happen to be an interpreter in legal or medical settings, the working circumstance becomes paramount, otherwise serious mistakes can occur when interpreting procedures of surgeries to patients. In addition, it is a fatal mistake when interpreters fail to interpret properly in court that might lead to a death sentence or free from imprisonment for the accused. Therefore, a good working environment for interpreters should be well provided to prevent mistakes. Moreover, safe working environment can also improve the interpreters to perform excellent performances resulting in good outcomes. There are three aspects of working conditions that should be paid full attention in order for the interpreters to do their job professionally, including physical wise, emotional wise, and financial wise, as explained in the following.

### *PHYSICAL WISE*

In some developing countries such as Indonesia, the recognition and consideration of safe and good working conditions of workplace for interpreters are still low. These conditions lead to disharmony cooperation between interpreters and less-knowledgeable clients. Clients probably have lack of knowledge about the need of


interpreters during their performance. For example, the process of interpreting in Indonesian courtroom in 2011 was criticized because the interpreters and the judges did not make eye contact. Interpreters also spoke out about the below rate of pay and inappropriate work conditions, meanwhile, judicial officer complained about the low quality of interpreter performance. This is in regard of the need to enhance technologies in courtroom to provide a proper audibility working condition settings surrounded by technical electronic access (Hale, 2011).

In fact, not only in Indonesia, the problem of lack of public's knowledge about the profession of interpreters is also seen as the problem in Australia. As can be seen from the result of national survey conducted in Australian courts involving 148 judicial officers and 138 practicing interpreters acted as respondents in regards to supporting how importance of fulfilling basic needs such as the position of seats and tables, stationary, lighting, electronic tools and even drinking water (Hale, 2011).

According to Nagao (2001), a dramatically improved working condition which was then seen as the awareness of the importance of qualified interpreters became widely spread. Now, confidential documents are sent to the interpreters to be studied prior to court hearing. The attentiveness of the significance of competent interpreters have elevated working environment to an advance level. Consequently, interpreters are provided prior information despite of the confidentiality.

Norström, Fioretos, and Gustafsson (2012) also acknowledged that working condition is essential for interpreters to perform professional interpretation services. The more supportive working conditions provided for the interpreters are, the better the quality of interpretation are produced. In fact, occasionally interpreters merely need minor adjustment of the setting of the place such as the position of chair, table, screen monitor, speaker, tool for writing, or even water to drink during a break. Those requirements are quite easy to fulfill only if the clients are aware of these conditions. Thus, a high quality of interpretation produced can satisfy the clients.

It is widely known that interpreting in trial might be presented with different circumstance and stressful and complex situation for interpreters (Valero-Garcés, 2005). Therefore, technical conditions need to be first considered because problematic technical conditions can lead to bad interpretation. Even though sometimes matters such as lighting, microphone, background noise, recording cameras, and other electronic system seem insignificant and are being ignored, they indeed affect the performance of interpreters (Hale & Stern, 2011).



As has been cited in Martin and Taibi (2012), it is well acknowledged in professional practice and in theory that interpreting community often causes emotional stress and work-related trauma because of the human conditions and situations where problems occur and unpleasant-problematic narratives interpreters deal with.

### *EMOTIONAL WISE*

Besides physical wise, emotional factors also turn paramount for interpreters. As commonly understood that being interpreters in crime trial or emergency medical setting are not an easy task because it requires interpreters to be involved physically and mentally.

As the case occurred in bomb trial in Madrid that presiding judge was not aware of the circumstance and standard technical issue that cannot be ignored particularly when interpreter cannot access comfortable tools e.g. headset and loudspeaker system to deliver the message in the courtroom (Martin & Taibi, 2012). Moreover, interpreters will also be mentally pressed since this was one of the most intense trials and it involved international media coverage especially when the main issue of the coverage is mistakes made by interpreters.

Research has noted that interpreting work frequently triggers mental stress and even vicarious traumatization due to human conditions, conflict situations, and horrifying accounts that interpreters encounter (Baistow, 1999; Niska, 2002; Rana, Shah, & Chaudhuri, 2009; Valero-Garcés, 2005). Thus, the cases or events that involved interpreters' emotional experiences also need to be taken into account. For instance, interpreters in Aceh, Indonesia, in many opportunities serve clients whose research is about conflict and tsunami in Aceh, hence, interpreters need to render the stories, facts or significant details about tsunami tragedy in 2004. Such working conditions obviously involve interpreters' emotional experiences because they were also victims of the tsunami.

Similar to the study of refugee, interpreters working with humanitarian organization while back then they were refugees as well. Same as tsunami victims in Aceh, they also experienced traumatic condition that recalled their memory of the tragedy. Remarkably, they are required to interpret specific words that causes a high level of distress. This example is undoubtedly a very uncomfortable situation when interpreters has been an object of emotional burden and suffer because of their daily work requirement (Holmgren, Søndergaard, & Elklit, 2003).

In a different case, in court, judges or defendants should not interrupt interpreters to interfere with their interpretation unless it is wrong. For instance, the case of bomb trial where “the presiding judge was not aware of (or did not understand) these technical issues and on several occasions, he publicly rebuked the interpreters for not offering true simultaneous interpreting” in which then resulted in a public chaos, where not only the bomb trial became a news topic but also interpreters’ mistake was discussed about (Martin & Taibi, 2012, p. 150). This is noteworthy that the interpreters’ collective morale would be seriously affected by the questions and criticisms of their work quality of interpreting from the public especially those people who have no knowledge about interpreting field (Martin & Taibi, 2012).


In a medical setting, it is suggested that doctor and patient (client) to use the service from the same interpreter for a certain period of medication needs. This method is seen effective for patients (clients) since they can build trust to doctor and interpreter because they have been working together for such amount of time. In addition, patients can take advantages of this situation of not being shameful of medical record detail that should remain confidential (Fox & Gander, 2004).

It has to be considered that criticism or questions of their work will more or less distract interpreters’ concentration in producing their interpretation. There are a number of factors that need to be taken into account whether interpreters perform good quality of their work which are role and professional capacity, inadequate responsibility involved, sense of having participated in a historic event, and the intense emotion involved (Martin & Taibi, 2012).

#### *FINANCIAL WISE*

Besides physical and emotional wise, another most considered issue in working conditions for interpreter is the range of salaries. The pay for interpreters is varied based on what type of interpreting they are required to do. Telephone-based interpreters may have different payment compare to freelance interpreters and/or overseas conference interpreters, etc.

In regard to this, there is an encouraging action conducted by Japan Judicial Interpreters Association (JJIA) in Osaka in order to respect interpreters while doing their work, in this case is court interpreting, by supplying accurate knowledge of criminal procedures and improving the outlook or attitude of the conventional interpreters. This is well-executed by Justice Ministry in investing 4,500,000 yen (USD 37,000) to improve the Judicial Interpretation system as the Supreme court authorized training for interpreters (Nagao, 2011). Since then, they are encouraged to introduce themselves



professionally and mention their job descriptions including what they can do and cannot do to the accused, lawyers, and judges.

Regrettably it is distressing when interpreters have not been taken seriously in budgeting annual recruitment. As noted by Martin and Taibi (2011) that court is often hiring casual freelancers instead of sworn interpreters to meet the demand in court. Nevertheless, because of budgetary reason, they then rely on freelance interpreters. Given that situation, it leads to unexpected low performance of interpreters to meet the clients' expectation criteria. It is not rare that interpreters are required to perform above standard while they are underpaid.

In legal setting, regarding to the remuneration, "many complained that they are only paid by the hour of interpreting but expected to keep the full day free of other appointments in case they were needed for the full day" (Hale, 2011, p. xiii). Some interpreters also protested that their formal tertiary interpreting qualifications are often not taken into account at all in order to measure the portion of the remuneration (Hale, 2011).

Norström et al. (2012) pointed out the phenomenon of procuring interpretation service at open market. This is a unique situation where the skill of interpreting is being procured. This allows parties to pull down the price which consequently lowers the remuneration for interpreters and leads to the decrease of the quality of interpreters' performance. In line with this, Roziner and Shlesinger (2010) supported that certain working conditions, suitable environmental conditions, technical system setup, and also financial compensation are essential factors in respecting the professionalism of interpreters and encouraging them to perform better.


## CONCLUSIONS

Along with the increasing need of multi-language or multicultural sharing and cooperation, the profession of interpreter is becoming more vital and considered as one of the most important services. Also, the growth of interpreters' organizations in the world has a positive impact for interpreters to be better acknowledged. The interpreters' organizations such as AIIC (International Association of Conference Interpreters) which was established in 1950s has driven higher consideration for profession of interpreters to be acknowledged worldwide. In addition, it encourages interpreters to be more confident in protocoling their job descriptions and roles in any settings. In short, the working conditions of interpreters which include physical, emotional, and financial wise are extremely important for those who work as interpreters or for clients who use interpretation service. These factors have gradual

consequences in producing a good interpretation. The more well-equipped the working conditions are, the better the interpreters' performance are.

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