

How Remote Interpreting Changed the Japanese Interpreting Industry

Findings from an online survey conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT: It is widely known in the interpreting industry that the COVID-19 pandemic served as a catalyst for the global spread of remote interpreting, the technology for which had existed for years prior. As governments and businesses continued to hold their meetings online or in hybrid forms even after lockdowns were lifted, demand kept rising (Nimdzi Insights, 2022). In order to investigate the immediate impact of the pandemic on remote interpreting, an online survey with a focus on remote simultaneous interpreting (RSI) was conducted in the summer of 2020 in Japan (Matsushita, 2020b). The results revealed that while only 18.8% (n = 43) of the 229 respondents had RSI experience before the pandemic, the number jumped to 44.5% (n = 102) by the end of July 2020, with 91.7% (n = 210) of them envisioning that remote interpreting opportunities will continue to increase.

This prediction turned out to be true: a smaller survey conducted in Japan 17 months later in January 2022 revealed that all 51 respondents (100%) had experienced remote interpreting, with 58.8% (n = 30) saying that almost all of their assignments (at the time of the survey) were taking place remotely (Ikaros Publications, 2022). This trend is, of course, not limited to Japan. Numerous industry reports published in 2021 and 2022 showed a shared conviction that remote interpreting is here to stay (e.g., Association of Language Companies, 2021; Nimdzi Insights, 2022; Slator, 2022).

Against this backdrop, this study conducted a detailed analysis of the

survey responses from Matsushita (2020b) to reinvestigate the transformation the interpreters experienced during the most turbulent months of the pandemic and find insights into remote interpreting in the post-pandemic world. Compared to Matsushita (2020b), which reported the aggregated survey results, this study will focus more on differences among the interpreters, language pairs, and interpreting genres represented.

KEYWORDS: remote simultaneous interpreting (RSI), interpreting industry, interpreter survey, Japanese, COVID-19

要旨: コロナ禍において、急速に進んだのが、通信回線を利用した遠隔通訳 (remote interpreting) である (Nimdzi Insights, 2022)。欧米においては数年前から導入が進んでいたが、日本においては新型コロナウイルスの感染拡大を受けて、初めて本格的な導入が始まった。このような状況に鑑み、松下 (Matsushita, 2020b) は日本語を言語ペアに含む通訳者に対する質問紙調査を実施し、コロナ禍における通訳者の稼働状況の変遷と、遠隔通訳、とりわけ RSI の普及の実態を明らかにした。当時は緊急調査的な意味合いもあり全体的な傾向を示すにとどまったが、コロナ禍の終息如何に関わらず遠隔通訳は今後も継続的に採用される見通しとなったため (Association of Language Companies, 2021; Nimdzi Insights, 2022; Slator, 2022)、本研究では調査結果を再分析し、言語や通訳分野ごとの違いも加味しつつ、通訳者の立場から「ポスト・コロナ」の通訳業界を展望する。

キーワード: 遠隔同時通訳 (RSI)、通訳業界、質問紙調査、日本語、新型コロナウイルス

1. Introduction

At the time of writing, two and a half years have passed since December 2019, when the global spread of the novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) first surfaced in Wuhan, China. The number of people infected in Japan gradually increased in February 2020, following a mass outbreak onboard the cruise ship *Diamond Princess*, docked in the port of Yokohama just 30 kilometers away from central Tokyo. The number of cases continued growing, leading the Japanese government to declare a nationwide state of emergency in April 2020. Restaurants and stores closed, especially at night, and economic activity

visibly slowed.

Spring has always been a busy season for interpreters in Japan, with many international conferences taking place not only in Tokyo but also in other large cities. However, strict border restrictions on inbound travelers resulted in the cancellation of most conferences, which meant that interpreting services at these events were no longer necessary. As a result, like many of their peers abroad, interpreters in Japan suddenly found themselves with no assignments (Matsushita, 2020a). Some started to explore opportunities outside the industry, while others looked for in-house interpreting jobs.

However, by early summer 2020, remote interpreting started to emerge as an alternative to on-site interpreting in Japan. Before the pandemic, over-the-phone interpreting (OPI) and video remote interpreting (VRI) had been used in business and community settings, but RSI was used only in a limited capacity (Takeda & Matsushita, 2021). This situation began to change rapidly as the demand from the global business community forced meetings to take place online, which meant that interpreters had to transition in tandem in order to stay relevant.

It was against this backdrop that an online survey to investigate the impact of the pandemic on the Japanese interpreting industry was conducted (Matsushita, 2020b). A total of 229 interpreters with working languages that include Japanese responded to the survey in August 2020. The results were compiled in September and later published as a report in the Japan Association for Interpreting and Translation Studies (JAITS) journal, *Interpreting and Translation Studies No. 20*. The primary purpose of the report was to present a snapshot of the drastic changes occurring in the industry at that time and to provide food for thought to researchers and practitioners in Japan. Therefore, only the aggregated results of the initial analysis were reported, and only in Japanese.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic continued well beyond the initial prediction, and event organizers needed to come up with innovative, hybrid solutions, which often meant that interpreters had to continue to interpret remotely. As Hickey (2021) points out:

[T]he future of interpreting will be a mix of adaptation and co-existence. We expect, for example, conference interpreting to move towards a hybrid

model where any of the parties involved—the interpreters, the attendees, and the speakers—have the option of either being onsite or connecting to the conference remotely from anywhere in the world. This means that, even for in-person events, not all participants and interpreters will necessarily have to be onsite. This option existed before March 2020 but the pandemic exposed the remote option as a real, viable solution. Going forward, we can expect such a hybrid model to become the new norm and to further boost growth and innovation within remote interpreting (para. 5).

Given the current situation surrounding the interpreting industry, and considering that no comprehensive study has been conducted to explore the impact of remote interpreting on the industry and its implications in the Japanese context, revisiting Matsushita's (2020b) data in detail and presenting findings in English has a renewed purpose. With this in mind, a deeper analysis of individual responses was conducted, the results of which will be presented in the following sections.

2. Survey Overview

This section explains the basic construction of the survey. As mentioned earlier, it was conducted in August 2020 when the COVID-19 vaccines were not yet available and businesses were struggling to find ways to let their employees work from home. The survey was carried out online using Google Forms so that no one would have to leave their homes to participate, which also allowed for the participation of interpreters living overseas. The target was broadly set as individuals aged 20 and older who provided paid interpreting services in 2019 with Japanese as one of the working languages. Participants were asked to respond anonymously, and no personal information (including email addresses) was collected. Requests for participation were made through professional organizations such as JAITS, the Japan Translation Federation (JTF), the Japan Translation Association (JTA), and the Japan Association of Translators (JAT). In addition, cooperation was solicited through the personal connections of the survey administrator and the participants. An ethical review was conducted by Rikkyo University

Graduate School of Intercultural Communication's ethical review committee in July, and the survey was made accessible from August 1 till August 31, 2020. During this one-month survey period, 229 valid responses were collected.

2.1 Initial Analysis

First, the main results of the survey, including those presented in the aforementioned report in Japanese (Matsushita, 2020b), will be presented.

2.1.1 Attributes of the respondents

Of the 229 respondents, 89.5% (n = 205) were female and 10.5% (n = 24) were male. The largest age group was those in their 50s (41.9%, n = 96), followed by those in their 40s (29.7%, n = 68), 30s (14.0%, n = 32), and 60s (10.0%, n = 23). Those aged 70 and over and those in their 20s together accounted for 2.2% (n = 5). For place of residence, Tokyo was the most common response (43.2%, n = 99), followed by Kanagawa Prefecture (10.5%, n = 24), Hyogo Prefecture (6.6%, n = 15), Osaka Prefecture (6.1%, n = 14), and Chiba Prefecture (5.2%, n = 12). While the majority of the respondents lived in Japan, 10.9% (n = 25) of them lived overseas, including 4.8% (n = 11) in the U.S., 2.2% (n = 5) in the U.K., and one each in Argentina, Australia, China, France, Hong Kong, Myanmar, the Netherlands, and Norway. Regarding their native language, Japanese was the most common at 86.5% (n = 198) among those who only gave one answer. When respondents who chose multiple answers were added, Japanese native speakers amounted to 93.0% (n = 213), followed by English (6.1%, n = 14), Chinese (3.1%, n = 7), Korean (1.3%, n = 3), and French (0.9%, n = 2). Other languages included Burmese, Dutch, Norwegian, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, and Japanese Sign Language (JSL), each with only one respondent.

In terms of interpreter type, conference interpreters (excluding in-house interpreters) were the most common (53.3%, n = 122). In-house interpreters followed with 17.9% (n = 41), tour guide interpreters with 7.9% (n = 18), judicial interpreters with 5.7% (n = 13), medical interpreters with 2.6% (n = 6), and sign language interpreters with 1.7% (n = 4). There were also cases where multiple job titles were submitted in the free answer column, comprising a wide range of responses from “interpreter specialized in performing arts”

to “university professor,” including one that identified the respondent as a “remote interpreter.”

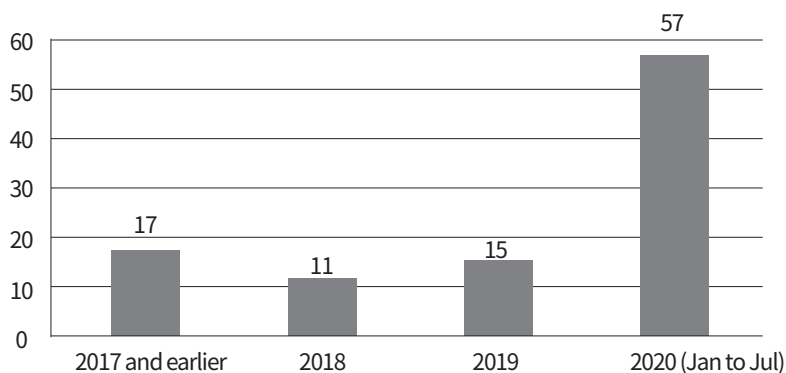
As for years of experience, interpreters with 21–30 years of experience were the most common, accounting for 23.6% ($n = 54$) of the respondents. Next was 6–10 years (21.0%, $n = 48$), followed by 11–15 years (18.3%, $n = 42$), 16–20 years (14.4%, $n = 33$), 3–5 years (12.2%, $n = 28$), 31 years or more (6.1%, $n = 14$), 1–2 years (2.6%, $n = 6$), and less than one year (1.7%, $n = 4$). This meant that 62.4% ($n = 143$) had been working for 11 years or longer, signifying that the survey attracted responses from relatively experienced interpreters. Regarding working language pairs, among those who provided a single response, Japanese-English was the most common (66.4%, $n = 152$), followed by Japanese-Spanish (5.7%, $n = 13$), Japanese-Russian (5.2%, $n = 12$), Japanese-Chinese (3.1%, $n = 7$), Japanese-Korean (2.6%, $n = 6$), Japanese-JSL (1.3%, $n = 3$), Japanese-French (0.9%, $n = 2$), and Japanese-Thai (0.4%, $n = 1$). A total of 14.0% ($n = 32$) mentioned that they work in multiple language pairs, with Japanese-English being the dominant language pair ($n = 31$). Other language combinations included Burmese, Dutch, German, Indonesian, Italian, Malay, Norwegian, Portuguese, and Swedish.

2.1.2 Remote interpreting experience

The survey asked respondents whether they had experience in remote interpreting, which includes OPI, VRI, and RSI. Of the 229 respondents, a substantial majority of 82.5% ($n = 189$) answered “yes.” Among those respondents, VRI was used the most (85.7%, $n = 162$), followed by OPI (73.0%, $n = 138$), with only 56.1% ($n = 106$) having RSI experience. When asked whether they had already worked on RSI assignments, 54.0% ($n = 102$) answered “yes,” indicating that four of the respondents who answered that they have “remote interpreting experience” to the earlier question did not have experience with actual assignments. Therefore, follow-up questions were asked, targeting the 102 respondents with RSI assignment experience. These questions included the types of platforms and conference systems used, the typical equipment setup for RSI, and how frequently and from where respondents took RSI assignments. Additional questions were asked regarding the number of interpreters assigned (solo, pair, or more) and whether they have

different rates for RSI compared to on-site assignments. A detailed analysis of these responses beyond the scope of Matsushita (2020b) was conducted for this study, the results of which will be presented in Section 3. In the following subsections, the aggregated answers to the questions regarding the first RSI experience, RSI's impact on physical health, and the pros and cons of RSI will be shown to provide an overview of some of the key findings from Matsushita (2020b).

Figure 1: First RSI experience ($n = 102$)



2.1.3 First RSI experience

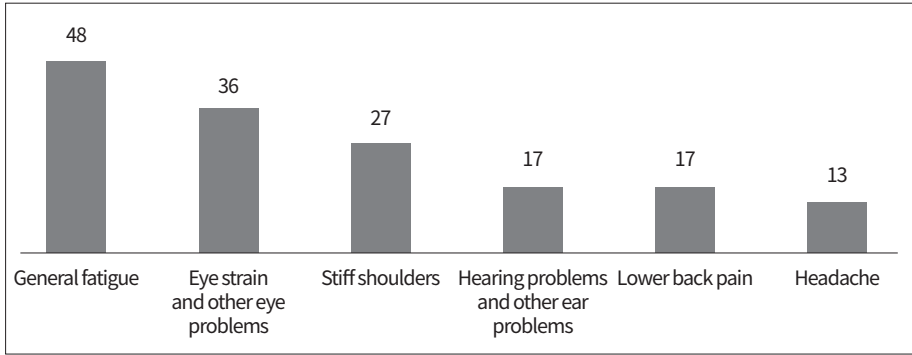
As shown in Figure 1, 57.8% ($n = 59$) of the respondents experienced RSI for the first time during the COVID-19 pandemic. Only 10.8% ($n = 11$) of all the respondents had their first RSI experience in 2018, and 14.7% ($n = 15$) in 2019. However, 16.7% ($n = 17$) of the experienced respondents had experienced RSI in or before 2017, indicating that RSI had already begun to spread among interpreters of language pairs that include Japanese years before the outbreak. A gradual increase in RSI was observed from 2018 to 2019, but the growth accelerated in 2020, especially after the spread of COVID-19.

2.1.4 Impact on physical health

Matsushita (2020b) found that the majority of the interpreters with RSI experience were providing their services from home (88.2%, $n = 90$). Given

that most of the respondents from Japan were living in the greater Tokyo area (63.3%, n = 145) where rent is high and residences tend to be small, many interpreters are likely to be working in cramped spaces in the corner of their bedrooms or living rooms. Since most RSI platforms require the use of a computer connected to Ethernet, interpreters would need to sit in front of a fixed screen for hours at a time in these less favorable environments. In light of this anticipated reality, the survey asked whether the interpreters had noticed any adverse impacts of RSI on their physical health. The respondents were asked to select all symptoms that applied and provide additional ones in the free answer column. The symptoms with the highest number of responses are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Physical health problems (n = 102)



Although 15 respondents said they had not noticed any difference in their physical health when completing remote versus on-site assignments and 11 said they were in better physical condition working remotely (possibly because they do not have to commute), many seem to have felt a negative impact of RSI on their physical condition. The results of additional analysis of individual answers conducted for this study are provided in Section 3.4.1.

2.1.5 Pros and cons of RSI

Despite many respondents suffering from worsened physical wellbeing from doing RSI, the increase in the number of those taking RSI assignments clearly

shows that the pros outweigh the cons. When asked to choose one or more advantages of RSI, the most common answer was “no need to commute,” accounting for 88.2% (n = 90) of the total. This was followed by “the ability to take assignments regardless of the place of residence” (68.6%, n = 70) and “the ability to interpret in a comfortable setting (including clothing)” (58.8%, n = 60). Answers chosen by less than 50% of the respondents included “the ability to take assignments from overseas” (46.1%, n = 47), “no need to go on business trips involving overnight stays” (45.1%, n = 46), “the increase in time spent with family members” (34.3%, n = 35), “easier to look things up while interpreting” (30.4%, n = 31), “the ability to take more assignments in a single day” (28.4%, n = 29), “better audio environment (including the use of microphone by the speakers and the support from technical staff)” (26.5%, n = 27), and “feel more relaxed being away from the client and the booth partner” (10.8%, n = 11).

When asked about the disadvantages of RSI, the number one response was “insufficient communication between interpreters (before and during interpretation)” (76.5%, n = 78), followed by “difficulty in the timing and method of handovers” (75.5%, n = 77), and “less non-verbal information available compared to on-site assignments” (73.5%, n = 75). Others included “the inability to have adequate briefing with the speaker” (69.6%, n = 71), “being prone to technical problems (e.g. equipment failure, unstable connection)” (67.6%, n = 69), “the need for the interpreter to secure a suitable working environment (sound insulation, backdrop, acoustics, internet connection)” (62.7%, n = 64), “technological tasks (e.g. computer operations) are complicated” (48.0%, n = 49), and “concerns about being recorded without prior consultation” (48.0%, n = 49). Compared to the pros, cons centered around the challenges that may directly impact interpreting performance.

3. New Findings

As mentioned earlier, further analysis was conducted for this study focusing on the differences in the respondents’ characteristics. This section outlines the key findings from the analysis.

3.1 Domestic vs. Overseas

In order to investigate the uniqueness of remote interpreting in the Japanese market, the survey data was divided into two categories by place of residence: domestic ($n = 204$) and overseas ($n = 25$). This section focuses on some of the major differences found by comparing the two.

3.1.1 Remote interpreting experience

A clear difference was observed regarding remote interpreting experience in general. When asked whether they had any remote interpreting experience (including OPI, VRI, and RSI), 96.0% ($n = 24$) of the respondents living overseas answered “yes,” with only one respondent from Asia answering “no.” On the other hand, among the respondents living in Japan, 80.9% ($n = 165$) had experience in remote interpreting while the remainder (19.1%, $n = 39$) had none. Even considering that 11 of the 39 respondents who had no remote interpreting experience in Japan were tour guide interpreters whose service would be hard to provide online, the disparity is apparent. This suggests that remote interpreting has been adopted earlier in overseas markets compared to Japan.

Results of a different data comparison support this view. Of the 16 respondents living overseas who specifically said they had taken RSI assignments, 75.0% ($n = 12$) had done so before the spread of COVID-19 (2019 or earlier). This is in stark contrast with the numbers for interpreters living in Japan. While 86 of those respondents said they had taken RSI assignments, only 36.0% ($n = 31$) had experience in RSI in or before 2019. Although no single reason can explain these differences, it is reasonable to conclude that the pandemic was a critical driver of the adoption of RSI in Japan.

3.1.2 Future outlook

Another interesting phenomenon was observed regarding the future outlook of remote interpreting. While an overwhelming majority of interpreters in both groups predicted that opportunities for remote interpreting would grow in the future, those living in Japan showed a greater eagerness to take remote

interpreting assignments whether or not the pandemic ended. When asked whether they are willing to take on remote interpreting assignments that do not require commuting, 42.2% (n = 86) of the respondents living in Japan answered, “I am willing to take them regardless of (the situation surrounding) COVID-19,” compared to the 36.3% (n = 74) who said they would like to do remote interpreting only “when on-site assignments are scarce.” In the case of respondents living overseas, the difference was much smaller: 48.0% (n = 12) and 44.0 % (n = 11) respectively.

Similarly, when asked what the ideal balance between on-site and remote assignments would be, 43.6 % (n = 89) of the respondents living in Japan answered that they would prefer the majority of their assignments to be remote. However, the ratio of those who shared this preference among the respondents living overseas was lower (40.0%, n = 10). Although the difference was not so significant, the results suggest that the interpreters residing overseas, who overall had practiced remote interpreting longer than their counterparts in Japan, were less willing to continue taking remote assignments, especially if they had the option to work on-site.

3.2 Conference Interpreters vs. In-house Interpreters

The subsequent comparative analysis this study conducted was that of conference interpreters and in-house interpreters. The survey included a question that asked, “Which of the following best describes your work?” Multiple answers were provided for the respondents to choose from: a) conference interpreter (excluding in-house interpreters), b) in-house interpreter, c) sign language interpreter, d) medical interpreter, e) judicial interpreter, f) tour guide interpreter, and g) others. The in-house interpreters were excluded from conference interpreters by design to allow for a direct comparison between groups a) and b) to see if the answers differ based on the form of employment. In this section, some of the key findings from this comparison will be presented.

3.2.1 Remote interpreting experience

First, the proportion of those with remote interpreting experience was compared between the two groups. In the case of the 41 in-house interpreters, 92.7% (n = 38) of the respondents answered that they have remote interpreting experience. The proportion was almost the same among the 122 conference interpreters (92.6%, n = 113), meaning that there was no reported difference in remote interpreting experience between in-house interpreters and freelancers.

However, when asked about their first experience with RSI, the results slightly differed. Of the 18 in-house interpreters who said they had taken RSI assignments (43.9%), 33.3% (n = 6) responded that their RSI experience predated the pandemic while 66.7% (n = 12) had their RSI debut in 2020. In the case of conference interpreters, 59.8% (n = 73) had completed RSI assignments, of which 43.8% (n = 32) had their first experience in or before 2019. Although more than half (56.2%, n = 41) started taking RSI assignments in 2020, the difference indicates that freelance conference interpreters had more exposure to remote interpreting before the spread of COVID-19 than in-house interpreters who were introduced to the technology largely due to the pandemic.

3.2.2 Platforms used

In order to compare what types of platforms were used by the two groups for RSI assignments, another layer of analysis was conducted for those with RSI experience. The survey included an item asking the participants to select all the RSI platforms they have used for actual assignments from an alphabetized list of common platforms such as Interactio, Interprefy, Interpretex (a Japan-made platform), KUDO, and VoiceBoxer. The aggregated findings were presented in Matsushita (2020b), but for this study, the responses were analyzed separately for conference interpreters and in-house interpreters.

Of the 18 in-house interpreters, only 7 (38.9%) had used dedicated RSI platforms such as Interactio, Interprefy, and Interpretex. As for the conference interpreters, 33 of the 73 conference interpreters (45.2%) had used RSI platforms, including KUDO, VoiceBoxer, and ZipDX, in addition to the ones mentioned by the in-house interpreters. Some of the conference

interpreters listed multiple platforms, including two who listed four platforms in total, while all the in-house interpreters listed only one or none. The results indicate that in-house interpreters had fewer options for RSI and also less exposure to dedicated RSI platforms when compared to freelance conference interpreters.

3.3 Community Interpreters

Using the respondents' self-identified job descriptions (see Section 2.1.1), an analysis focusing on community interpreters was conducted. From the six categories listed in Section 3.2, c) sign language interpreter, d) medical interpreter, and e) judicial interpreter were grouped as "community interpreters." Some of the unique findings applicable to this group will be presented in the following subsections.

3.3.1 Remote interpreting experience

As Corpas Pastor and Gaber (2020, p. 59) point out, new technologies, especially those for remote interpreting, have been introduced in the field of community (or public service) interpreting for some time and have "assisted in the elimination of language barriers between community service providers and minority language speakers whilst reducing costs and increasing the interpreters' availability." Although RSI has become more common recently, OPI and VRI have been actively used in community settings (Angelelli, 2020).

This tendency was also observed in the survey results. Of the 23 respondents grouped as "community interpreters" for this study, 13 were judicial interpreters, 6 were medical interpreters, and 4 were sign language interpreters. All of the medical interpreters ($n = 6$) and all but one sign language interpreter ($n = 3$) said that they have remote interpreting experience, supporting findings from prior research. However, 5 out of the 13 judicial interpreters (38.5%) answered that they have no remote interpreting experience, indicating a slower introduction of this technology in Japan's legal community.

3.3.2 Types of remote interpreting

Further analysis of the types of remote interpreting experienced by community interpreters was conducted. As shown in Table 1, the types used clearly differed by specialty. Of the 13 judicial interpreters, no one had used RSI as of August 2020, again reflecting a conservative attitude towards new technology in legal settings. OPI and VRI were used by about half of the judicial interpreters, respectively, but to a lesser degree than by the medical interpreters. The use of OPI and VRI was most prevalent in the case of the medical interpreters among the three types. No sign language interpreters had used OPI for obvious reasons, but RSI had already been used more than VRI. Even with a small sample size, the comparison offers a unique insight into the use of remote interpreting in community settings in Japan.

Table 1: Comparison among judicial, medical, and sign language interpreters

	Judicial (n = 13)	Medical (n = 6)	Sign Language (n = 4)
OPI	46.2% (n = 6)	83.3% (n = 5)	0.0% (n = 0)
VRI	53.8% (n = 7)	66.7% (n = 4)	50.0% (n = 2)
RSI	0.0% (n = 0)	33.3% (n = 2)	75.0% (n = 3)

3.4 Other Findings

3.4.1 Physical concerns

Matsushita (2020b) found that many interpreters are experiencing negative health impacts while performing RSI, the main results of which were repeated in Section 2.1.4. In this subsection, individual answers to the questions regarding health issues not captured in the aggregated result will be further analyzed to explore the nature of the problems.

As seen in Figure 2, “general fatigue” was most commonly felt, followed by “eye strain and other eye problems,” “stiff shoulders,” “hearing problems and other ear problems,” “lower back pain,” and “headache.” Of the listed symptoms, “repetitive strain injury” was the least frequently reported, selected by only one respondent. In addition, 12 respondents commented in the free answer column. Although they were free to write anything in their own words, half

of them ($n = 6$) mentioned that “mental fatigue” increases in RSI assignments. Collectively, they explained that the fatigue comes from being responsible for securing the appropriate working environment, such as soundproofing and maintaining a reliable internet connection, as well as making sure that all the necessary pieces of equipment are functioning properly, all of which are not required in on-site assignments. AIIC’s reference guide on remote simultaneous interpreting also mentions “additional perceived stress and cognitive load” as one of the potential health issues (AIIC, 2020, p. 11).

There was another question at the end of the survey where participants were asked to comment on remote interpreting in general or potential areas of improvement. Out of the 158 comments, 12 were related to health concerns, including the need for appropriate breaks, which they claimed are often overlooked in remote interpreting because the interpreters are not physically present. Although not directly related to health concerns, 44 respondents commented on the need for a better audio environment (e.g., the use of appropriate microphones by the speakers, the need for those not speaking to mute their microphones and to remove background noise), with some linking these issues to the potential impact on their hearing ability. The result coincides with the findings of (AIIC, 2020, p. 10) which lists “acoustic shock” as a health concern in remote interpreting.

3.4.2 Cultural differences toward RSI

Despite the fact that interpreters are not fully happy with the new working environments required for remote interpreting, only one respondent explicitly said, “I don’t want to take remote interpreting assignments regardless of (the situation surrounding) COVID-19,” when asked about the willingness to take remote assignments. In the survey, a separate item asked the respondents about their experience with RSI combined with their interest in taking RSI assignments. The question offered four answer choices: a) I have already taken RSI assignments; b) I have not yet taken RSI assignments but have attended RSI seminars and workshops; c) I have not taken RSI assignments or attended a seminar, but I am interested in RSI; and d) I am not interested in RSI. The aim of this particular question was twofold: to select those who have actually experienced RSI assignments for further questioning (see Section 2.1.2)

and to understand the level of interest among those who have not.

This study conducted a detailed analysis of those who answered that they have no interest in RSI. Ten respondents answered that they were uninterested in RSI. Although attributes such as age, years of experience, place of residence, or job description did not reveal a pattern, one clear difference was observed based on working language pair(s). As seen in Section 2.1.1, Japanese-English was the most common among all the respondents (66.4%, $n = 152$). However, in this pool of those who were uninterested in RSI, only two (20%) were Japanese-English interpreters. Even including those who work in multiple language pairs, Japanese-English interpreters only amounted to 50% ($n = 5$) of the ten respondents in this group, while the same ratio for all 229 respondents was 79.9% ($n = 183$). There were two each for Japanese-Russian and Japanese-French and one for Japanese-Korean. Three mentioned more than one language pair: two for Japanese-English and Japanese-Spanish and one for Japanese-English and Japanese-Chinese. Since only 14.0% ($n = 32$) of all respondents mentioned that they work in multiple language pairs, the ratio was much higher in this group (30%). The result suggests that there may be a difference in the level of interest in RSI by working language pair or the associated cultural characteristics.

4. Conclusion

Even after two and a half years since the outbreak of COVID-19, no one seems to be capable of predicting when this pandemic will end. It is likely that we will not return to the pre-COVID-19 way of interpreting (i.e., most assignments taking place on-site) anytime soon and that the interpreting industry will still need to rely on remote interpreting to survive. As this study showed, interpreters with Japanese as one of their language pairs were slow to introduce new technologies, especially those related to RSI, but quickly adjusted to the new reality in the midst of the pandemic. However, their approaches have varied. Depending on where they live or what languages they interpret between, the technologies used and the speed at which they were adopted differed. The same can be said for interpreters with different forms of employment and different interpreting specialties. While this study

alone cannot provide a comprehensive analysis of the cause and meaning of these differences, it is hoped that it succeeded in highlighting the necessity to focus on the individualities of the respondents when conducting these surveys. With technological advancements rapidly coming onto the market all the time, there seems to be a growing need for continuous observation of the interpreting industry as it transforms itself and how interpreters perceive and cope with future changes.

5. Limitations and Further Implications

As explained at the outset, the original survey on which this study is based was conducted in August 2020 as an immediate response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, many specific questions were asked at the time, including how the number of assignments changed before and during the pandemic, how interpreting rates were changing with more assignments taking place remotely for shorter periods of time, and what type of equipment was purchased to facilitate RSI assignments. While the findings were both interesting and informative, the responses to these questions were excluded from this study in order to avoid presenting outdated data and giving a wrong impression of the situation surrounding the respondents today. For this reason, only the results relevant to the reality of today (mid-2022) were presented.

Another shortcoming of this study was the limited data used for additional research, especially in the case of interpreters living overseas ($n = 25$) and community interpreters ($n = 23$). Given the relatively low number of responses gathered, it may have been overly ambitious to extract characteristics and themes from the data within these subgroups. The results were nevertheless presented with the hope that they would prompt further research. The same applies to the findings regarding perceived health impacts of RSI and different attitudes towards RSI based on working language pair, which were limited in scope but worth exploring. It is hoped that surveys related to remote interpreting will continue to be conducted around the world so that the outcomes can be compared and a fuller understanding of the impact and future of remote interpreting can be achieved.

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Professional Profile

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