29

Sign language interpretation training, testing, and accreditation in Asia

Felix Sze, Fion Wong, Connie Chun Yi Lo, Samuel Chew, Rebecca Sun and Yuya Yanai

Introduction

This paper offers an overview of the sign language (SL) interpretation training, testing, and accreditation in 20 cities and/or countries in Asia. Our discussions are based on published studies, online information, and questionnaire findings, as well as individual interviews. The cities and/or countries covered in this paper include Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, China, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan, Macau, Malaysia, Mongolia, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Singapore, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Thailand, The Philippines, and Vietnam.[1] Overall, these cities and/or countries vary a great deal with respect to the availability of SL interpretation training, testing, and accreditation. Interview data suggest that the most pressing issues confronting SL interpreters across the region are a lack of provision or availability of formal sign language interpreter training, and insufficient societal resources from local or national governments to support and secure the long-term professional development of these sign language interpreters.

This paper will begin with a review of previous literature on SL interpretation training, testing, and accreditation in Asia. This is followed by the methodology of our study, and its findings. We end with some concluding remarks.

Overview

Literature review

When compared to the western world, studies on sign interpretation training, testing, and accreditation in the Asia region are few and far between. The Asia regions of the World Association of Sign Language Interpreters released a brief report (WASLI-Asia, 2015) on the circumstances of 19 cities and/or countries in Asia at that time, on the basis of the answers provided by its members to a list of questions. There were two sets of questions in WASLI-Asia's questionnaire that were relevant to our current study:

DOI: 10.4324/9781003019664-38

1. Do you have interpreter training in your country? Can you give a brief explanation about the training programme?
2. Do you have a testing and accreditation system to decide who is qualified to be a professional sign language interpreter? If yes, can you please briefly describe the system?

WASLI-Asia found that formal sign interpretation training (i.e., training offered by academic institutes, or non-governmental organisations recognised by their governments) were only available in eight countries: India, Japan, Jordan, South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, and Vietnam. Additionally, informal training such as workshops or short courses were offered in eight further cities and/or countries: Bangladesh, Cambodia, China, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Macau, Mongolia, and Singapore. From these 16 places, only six countries (India, Cambodia, Japan, Jordan, South Korea, and Taiwan) had testing and accreditation system for SL interpreters. However, some of the answers given by the respondents were very brief, often omitting crucial information regarding details of the testing and accreditation systems such as the: number of training hours, academic levels (i.e., certificate, diploma, undergraduate, postgraduate), etc. With the details of the testing and/or accreditation systems unspecified it is hard to understand or compare the circumstances of each city or country. Or indeed for useful comparisons to be made with other regions of the globe.

Let us now describe the history of development of training, testing, and accreditation as far as is known for seven cities and countries in the region. We suspect that these descriptions well describe the differences that can be found in Asia.

Japan

Eiichi and Shin'ichi (2009) offered a comprehensive overview of the historical development of the training for SL interpreters in Japan. According to them, government-funded training for SL interpreters, who were volunteers initially, started as early as the 1970s, with the volunteers trained as part of the social welfare programmes throughout the 1970s and 1980s. The National Sign Language Interpreters Certification was launched in 1989 under the approval of the Minister of Welfare and Labour. This led to the first training programme offered at the tertiary level in Japan in 1990. At the same time, state governments also supported separate examinations for interpreters. These examinations were unified in 2001 with the creation of a newer national-level examination.

Tsuruma and Yokkaichi (2013) described the status and issues of SL interpretation training in Japan.[2] Based on questionnaire data, Tsuruma and Yokkaichi found that interpretation programmes across the country suffered from a shortage of experienced trainers, insufficient budgets to ensure the quality of the courses, and the variable signing skills of the students at the start of the training. All in all, the circumstances for training in Japan are highly varied even though the testing is now unified.

Hong Kong

Fung (2014) looked into the historical development of SL interpretation in Hong Kong and compared it with other countries. Fong listed the training courses and assessments available in Hong Kong. She also reported on a case study of an experienced interpreter's career journey in the past two decades. The case study actually reflected the different stages of developments in the field of SL interpretation in Hong Kong as it has changed in the last 20 years.

When compared to other advanced countries in the West, Hong Kong lagged behind in the provision of training, the level of assessment and the provision of SL interpreting. services for Hong Kong citizens. Fung called for an immediate action to address these issues.

Malaysia

Chua (2014) reported a shortage of qualified SL interpreters in Malaysia. Despite the fact that Malaysia signed and ratified the UN CRPD in 2010, not much has been done to improve deaf people's right to access professional SL interpreting services. In 2007 there was a short-lived SL interpreter training programme funded by the government to train up a group of interpreters to improve their interpreting skills. However, the number of trainees was far from sufficient to meet the significant demand for interpretation services across Malaysia.

Chua urged the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development to set up a SL interpreting non-governmental organisation with the specific goals of training and certifying sign language interpreters. This was deemed essential to enhance the interpreters' professionalism, support professional development, and uphold the linguistic rights of deaf people in accordance with the UN CRPD.

Taiwan

Moratto (2020) is the first monograph on interpreting issues related to Taiwanese Sign Language (TSL). The monograph began with a brief history of Taiwan Sign Language, followed by the development and current situation of SL interpreting in Taiwan. Moratto argued that, despite a nation-wide certification system, there is a lack of systematic training for sign language interpreters to achieve certification. He then pointed out several linguistic aspects (e.g., metaphors, iconicity) of TSL that present a challenge to the SL interpreters and proposed to revamp the existing framework of interpretation assessment in Taiwan.

In addition, Moratto noted that there are limited full-time job opportunities, and few opportunities for reasonable remuneration when comparable to spoken language interpreters.

Thailand

Chaiwatthanakunwanich (2020) evaluated the standards, criteria, and performance indicators for the testing and accreditation of SL interpreters. With data from questionnaires and focus group discussions involving 50 sign language interpreters, Chaiwatthanakunwanich found that the criteria and indicators for evaluating the performance of sign language interpreters in Thailand were deemed suitable by stakeholders.

The Philippines

Baliza and Sison (2019) investigated how the training profile and working condition of Filipino SL interpreters affected their provision of services to the Deaf. With questionnaire data from 180+ interpreters and the focus group discussion of a selected subset of the informants, Baliza and Sison found that only 30% of the respondents had completed a SL interpretation certificate or diploma course. One third of respondents attended only interpretation workshops, and the remaining respondents had never received any form of training. Only one quarter of the respondents were working as full-time interpreters.

Despite the lack of training resources and limited full-time job opportunities, many of these interpreters were passionate about their work, and saw supporting the deaf community through interpretation as a meaningful mission for their lives. In addition, many of them found that interaction with the Deaf community was important for them to enhance their interpretation skills.

Baliza and Sison argued for a research-based sign interpretation curriculum and a nation-wide accreditation system. They also urged the professional organisations in the Philippines to collaborate with deaf communities and the government bodies to create more opportunities in interpreting employment and nurturing professional interpreters via professional development.

Vietnam

Tran (2020) introduced some basic techniques in interpreting from sign language to spoken language in the Vietnam context which included, for example, lexicalising, using classifier signs, transforming affirmative sentences to self-answer questions, etc. The paper aimed at offering a basic SL interpretation theory for the training of interpretation skills in Vietnam. This suggests that little formal education has been offered to sign language interpreters prior to this time, or at least in recent years.

Our brief review suggests that most Asian cities and/or countries suffer from a lack of systematic SL interpretation training, testing, and accreditation. In most cities and/or countries information is sparse. However, the information available suggests a prevalence of informal training, and a patchwork of educational provision, or professional development. This lack of consistency unavoidably affects the quality of the service that deaf people receive. Several years have passed since the release of WASLI-Asia report. This led to the authors considering what the current circumstances for sign language interpreters are. Have there been any improvements to the training of interpreters? What concerns do interpreters, hearing and deaf, have in their training and career development? These are the issues we explored in our study, which we shall now describe, focussing on the critical issues that it uncovered.

Critical issues and topics

Methodology

In the study, we invited hearing and deaf informants from 20 Asian cities and/or countries to fill in an online questionnaire and participate in individual interviews with our researchers (who are also interpreters).

Data collection

The questionnaire questions solicited information on the SL interpretation training, testing, and accreditation:

- Are there any interpretation training programmes in your city and/or country? Please provide information of these programmes (e.g., academic level, duration of training, etc.)
- Who are the trainers in the sign language interpretation training programmes?
- Is there any testing and accreditation system for sign language interpreters?
- What is the system like?

- What organisation is in charge of this system?
- Are Deaf people involved in the process?
- How many sign language interpreters are accredited in your city/country?

The individual interviews were conducted through Zoom by a deaf or hearing researcher experienced in interpretation. The informants were asked for clarifications of the answers they provided on the questionnaires. And to expand on their views on the issues, and challenges faced by sign language interpreters in their own cities and/or countries. The interviews were recorded and analysed for the commonalities in the responses and differences between different cities and/or countries.

Participants

Table 29.1 shows the number of hearing and deaf informants participating in the questionnaires and interviews. In total there were 56 informants (20 deaf, 36 hearing), the majority of whom were SL interpreters. Most informants completed both the questionnaires and interviews, but some participated in just one of them due to difficulties in arranging mutually convenient times for interview.

Table 29.1 Deaf and hearing informants in this study

Cities/Countries	*Total no . of informants (56)*	*Online Questionnaires*		*Individual Interviews*	
		Hearing	*Deaf*	*Hearing*	*Deaf*
1. Bangladesh	1	1		1	
2. Bhutan	1	1		1	
3. Cambodia	3	3		2	
4. China	2	1	1	1	1
5. Hong Kong	4	2	2	2	2
6. Indonesia	3	2	1	1	1
7. Japan	4	2	1	2	1
8. Macau	3	2	1	2	1
9. Malaysia	3	2	1	2	
10. Mongolia	3	1	2	1	1
11. Myanmar	3			2	1
12. Nepal	4	4		4	
13. Pakistan	1	1		1	
15. Singapore	3	1	2	1	2
16. South Korea	3	1	2	1	2
17. Sri Lanka	4	2		2	2
18. Taiwan	3	1	2	1	1
19. Thailand	4		1	3	1
20. Philippines	1	1		1	
20. Vietnam	3	2	1	1	1

Findings

This section first presents the availability of training, testing, and accreditation systems in individual cities and/or countries. We then present the challenges confronting the SL interpreters within their contexts in regard to professionalisation, working conditions, and other relevant issues.

Table 29.2 shows the SL interpretation training programmes and the accreditation systems and legislation that support the provision of SL interpretation in Asian cities/countries.

Table 29.2 Sign Language Interpretation training, testing & accreditation system in Asian countries

City/Country	*Training*	*Testing & Accreditation*
1. Bangladesh	A 40-hour course (mainly on vocabularies) offered by Bangladesh Association of Sign Language Interpreters (BASLI).	No
2. Bhutan	Informal workshops offered by Wangsel Institute for the Deaf. Short training occasionally offered by visiting volunteers/scholars from Thailand and Australia for the teachers who need to interpret.	No
3. Cambodia	A certificate programme of 245 hours (half vocabulary learning and half interpretation skills) (over 10 months) offered by Deaf Development Program at Phnom Penh.	No
4. China	(1) BA in Sign Language Interpretation, offered by (i) Zhengzhou University of Technology; (ii) Nanjing Normal University of Special Education; and (iii) Zhejiang Vocational College of Special Education. (2) Master's programme in Sign Language Broadcasting and Host in Television Broadcasting, offered by Jiangsu Normal University & Nanjing Normal University of Special Education	No[1]
5. Hong Kong	(1) Certificate in Professional Sign Language Interpretation, offered by the Hong Kong Society for the Deaf (QF 3, 15 credits, 76 contact hrs, 50 non-contact hrs, 24 hrs of practicum) (2) Professional Diploma in Sign Language Interpretation, offered by the Chinese University of Hong Kong (QF 4, 68 credits, 210 contact hrs, 45 hrs of practicum)[2] (3) Workshops or short courses offered by other deaf organisations.	No
6. Indonesia	Informal training offered by The Center of Indonesian Sign Language Interpreter Service	No[3]

Table 29.2 Cont.

City/Country	*Training*	*Testing & Accreditation*
7. Japan	(1) Sign language courses offered by local organisations that follow the guidelines set by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare on the training of SL staff and interpreters (170 hours) (2) A two-year course on SL interpretation offered by the National Rehabilitation Center for Persons with Disabilities (2400 hrs)[4] (3) Courses offered by some vocational schools.[5]	Three types of qualifications: (1) Municipal-level: sign language volunteers (2) Prefectural level: qualified sign language interpreters[6] (3) National level: Certified sign language interpreters
8. Macau	Two short training courses (18 hrs, 54 hrs) offered by the Chinese University of Hong Kong for the serving interpreters at the two deaf organisations	No
9. Malaysia	A part-time diploma programme in Sign Language Interpreting offered by RC Deaf Missions (one year, five months in duration)[7]	No
10. Mongolia	Short-term informal training organised by the Mongolian Association of Sign Language Interpreters and other NGOs	No[8]
11. Myanmar	Interpretation training (1.5 year) offered by the Social Welfare Department[9]	No
12. Nepal	Around 150 hours of training provided by the Kathmandu Association of the Deaf (KAD) (mostly on vocabularies). Other shorter training courses by local deaf organisations.	No
13. Pakistan	A four-month course offered by ConnectHear[10] Informal training by three other organisations.	**No**
14. Singapore	Short-term training provided by the Singapore Association of the Deaf	No
15. South Korea	(1) Korea National University of Welfare – BA degree offered by the Department of Korean Sign Language Teacher[11] (2) Korea Nazarene University – BA degree in Sign Language Interpretation Education[12] (3) Kangnam University – MA degree in Sign Language Interpretation and Translation[13]	National Sign Language Interpreter Test (for hearing interpreters) Hearing Impaired Interpreter Qualification test (for deaf interpreters)[14] Both tests are run by the South Korean Association of the Deaf
16. Sri Lanka	A one-year diploma offered by the government.[15] Diploma of Sign Language offered by the National Institute of Education[16]	No

(*continued*)

Table 29.2 Cont.

City/Country	*Training*	*Testing & Accreditation*
17. Taiwan	Sign language interpretation courses run by local organisation.[17] A sample course for Level C interpretation exam (general interpreting situation): 90 hrs of teaching, 6 hrs of practicum.[18] A sample course for Level B interpretation exam (professional domains such as education and legal setting): 72 hrs of teaching[19] A specific course for deaf SL interpreters: 60 hrs[20]	Level B and Level C Interpretation Exams are offered by The Skill Evaluation Centre of Workforce Development Agency, Ministry of Labor.
18. Thailand	(1) BA in Arts Programme in Thai Sign Language Interpreting, Ratchasuda College, Mahidol University.[21] (2) Graduate Diploma in Sign Language Interpreting at Suan Dusit University	An assessment system is being developed by Mahidol University, Suan Dusit University and the Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities, Ministry of Social Development and Human Security.[22]
18. The Philippines	Interpretation training (level 1–5) provided by the Philippine Association of Interpreters for Deaf Empowerment The Philippine National Association of Sign Language interpreters offers individual mentoring and informal sharing/workshops.	No
19. Vietnam	(1) Sign Language Interpreter Training Programme by Danish Deaf Association (DDL) and Hanoi National University of Education in Ha Noi (112 hrs)[23] (2) Sign Language Interpreter Training Programme organised by the Centre for Studying and Promoting Deaf Culture, Dong Nai University (300 hrs)[24]	No

1 According to our informant, there used to be a certifying exam for hearing SL interpreters in China that was based on Signed Chinese. However, it was suspended several years ago, as the certifying board intended to revamp the exam by including elements of natural signing. It is not yet known when the certifying exam will be re-launched.

2 QF stands for Qualifications Framework, which is a 7-level hierarchy set up by the Hong Kong Government to regulate the standards and academic levels of education programmes (www.hkqf.gov.hk/en/home/index.html). In this framework, associate degrees and higher diplomas belong to QF 4. An undergraduate degree is QF 5, and a master degree is QF 6. Pre-college level programmes, such as certificates or foundational certificates, typically belong to QF 3 or below (www.hkqf.gov.hk/en/KeyFeatures/ats/index.html). Information of the Professional Diploma of Sign Language Interpretation can be found at www.cslds.org/v4/programmes.php?id=20.

3 The Center of Indonesian Sign Language Interpreter Service (Pusat Layanan Juru Bahasa Isyarat, PLJ) and Indonesian Sign Language Interpreters (INASLI) are now working with the Agency for Language Development and Cultivation under the Ministry of Education and Culture in Indonesia to set up a standardised certificate for sign language interpreters.

4 The information of this course can be found at: www.rehab.go.jp/College/japanese/yousei/si/curriculum/.

5 Information on vocational schools that offer sign interpretation programmes can be found at: https://shingakunet.com/searchList/ksl_senkaku/jl_rd010/jm_rc110/js_r1050/.

6 The prefectural level exams are now unified by the National Centre for Sign Language Education. See the NCSLE website (www.com-sagano.com/about/hojin/igi) for details.

7 This diploma is not offered annually. This diploma was last offered in 2014–2015 (www.rcdeafmissionsmalaysia.com/sign-language-course/diploma-in-sign-language-interpreting/).

8 MASLI has certified some SL interpreters who have had many years of experience.

Table 29.2 Cont.

9 Since 2007, four rounds of training have been offered by the Department of Social Welfare in Myanmar, with initial support from Japan International Cooperation Agency (www.jica.go.jp/myanmar/english/activities/activity08.html). So far 79 hearing people were trained but only a few became full-time interpreters.
10 Information on the training offered by ConnectHear can be found at www.connecthear.org/post/the-need-for-sign-language-interpreters-and-how-connecthear-is-playing-its-part.
11 Although the name of the department is 'Korean Sign Language Teacher', the BA curriculum actually includes interpretation training (www.knuw.ac.kr/sign/main.do).
12 Information of this BA programme: https://cms.kornu.ac.kr/sle/index.do.
13 Information of this MA programme: https://grd.kangnam.ac.kr/.
14 Information on the test for deaf interpreters can be accessed at: www.deafkorea.com/ver/_deaf/test2.html.
15 Information of this course is found in an online news article in 2018 (www.dailymirror.lk/News-Features/Sri-Lanka-Terribly-short-of-sign-language-interpreters/131-147833). However, we cannot find any official document or website of it.
16 The Diploma of Sign Language covers sign language knowledge and some interpretation techniques. The programme is taught mainly by hearing instructors.
17 The Taiwanese Association of Sign Language interpreters has a website that provides information on sign language courses and interpretation courses throughout the country (http://taslifamily.org/?page_id=1602).
18 The information on this sample Level C interpretation course can be found at: www.yhsi.org.tw/OnePage.aspx?tid=139&id=153&fbclid=IwAR3Sch2_NI68LrEiGROOiNqnvBpu__T3Up7M_UOR41lEhW0bvjrC3Rv_GXQ.
19 The information on this sample Level B interpretation course can be found at: http://taslifamily.org/?p=5730.
20 This specific course for deaf interpreters was run in 2018 and 2019, and a total of 27 deaf signers were trained (http://taslifamily.org/?page_id=4791).
21 Information on this programme can be found at: https://rs.mahidol.ac.th/academic/thai_sign_language_interpreting.html.
22 There is no online information on how the assessment of SL interpreters works in Thailand.
23 This programme in Ha Noi is a temporary programme and it will soon be expanded by the Centre for Studying and Promoting Deaf Culture at Dong Nai University.
24 Besides demonstrating sufficient signing skills (as evaluated by deaf instructors), applicants for the Certificate in Sign Language Interpretation in Dong Nai University need to have completed the 300-hour Certificate in Sign Language Analysis offered by the Centre for Studying and Promoting Deaf Culture as a pre-requisite.

As shown in Table 29.2, there are some forms of training available in the majority of places according to our participants. This indicates that SL interpretation is well recognised within Asia as something that requires professional education before beginning to work. However, the duration and academic levels of the training varies, reflecting the diverse stages of development of SL interpretation as a profession across Asia. The duration of different interpreter training, or interpreter education, ranges from 40 hours in some places to four years in others.

This disparity in the duration of the training shows differences between informal and formal training. Informal training in the form of workshops and short courses are typically offered by NGOs such as deaf organisations. Locally or nationally accredited formal education programmes are run by universities, or organisations recognised by the governments. Among these 20 cities and/or countries, however, only three have a testing and accreditation system: Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea. The training circumstances, however, differ greatly, as described presently.

In Japan, the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare stipulates two curricular for sign language volunteers (80 hours) and interpreters (90 hours). One needs to complete both to become an interpreter,[3] totalling 170 hours of training. There are three levels of qualifications: municipal, prefectural, and national, with the national exam—the Sign Language Interpreter Certificate Examination (SLICE)—administered by the Information and Culture Centre for the Deaf (ICCD).

In Taiwan, assessment of SL interpreters was subsumed under the Skill Evaluation Centre of the Workforce Development Agency, Ministry of Labour since 2004. In general,

skilled labour is categorised into three levels: Level C (lowest), B (middle) and A (highest). At present, only Level C (general interpreting) and B (professional domains) examinations have been conducted for SL interpreters. Level A examination has never been offered because the total number of interpreters passing Level B is not sufficient (less than 60 as of June 2021 according to an online news article) to justify the launching of Level A examination.[4] The passing rates of Level C and B are rather low (on average 15–16%), according to the Taiwan Association of Sign Language Interpreters, reflecting a pressing need for quality sign interpretation training.[5] At present, interpreter training courses are offered by local deaf or sign language organisations with syllabi geared towards the Level C and B examinations.

South Korea is the only country to offer interpreter education at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels and also to have a testing and accreditation system. The National Certified Sign Language Interpreter Test (for hearing interpreters) is governed by the National Accreditation System for Private Qualifications (Article 19, The Framework Act on Qualification).[6] It consists of both a written test on the understanding of deafness and basics of sign interpretation, and a practical test comprising written interpretation, spoken Korean to Korean Sign Language interpretation, and Korean Sign Language to spoken Korean interpretation. Those who have acquired this qualification must complete at least 50 hours of professional development training within five years of passing the test, otherwise their licences will be suspended. A similar certification test is offered separately for deaf interpreters.

Emerging debates

Insufficient or a complete lack of formal training for SL interpretation

In our interviews, insufficient or a non-existent formal training is reported as the most common challenge or barrier named by the interpreter informants. It is extremely common in Asia for hearing people to begin undertaking sign language interpreting work immediately after they have completed one or two sign language courses. This means that those beginning to interpret are doing so without appropriate fluency in their national or local sign language. They also have no training or education in the role of interpreters or the interpreting process. This not only results in sub-standard interpreting quality, but also unintentional violations of interpreter codes of ethics, which adversely affects the perception of the profession as a whole. One of our interpreter informants made the following comment:

> It is not the case that, because you can sign you can do an interpretation job … In terms of ethics, a lot of them (i.e., interpreters who finished a sign language programme but did not receive any interpretation training) do not have any idea that interpreters do have codes of ethics. This creates a lot of challenges for them because they don't know how to behave as an interpreter…when they are doing their jobs, they tend to break some of the codes of ethics.

In addition, a lack of training may create tremendous stress for interpreters who are aware of their own inadequacies. One hearing interpreter informant who had no formal training, but was requested by the government to interpret for TV broadcast news said:

> It is difficult as we are not trained … we don't know if what we are doing is correct or not … we don't have the knowledge and skills … we do have feedbacks from the deaf saying that our signing was unclear.

Although this feedback can be cast in a positive light, the negative comments from deaf people may help interpreters identify how to improve their skills in a constructive way. This also highlights the demands placed on untrained interpreters who have no formal training on reflective practice. The feedback from deaf viewers may be devastating for frustrated interpreters who could not find any ways to upgrade their skills. This is identified by one CODA interpreter informant who commented:

> We don't have training for SL interpretation in our country. Without training we cannot perform well. We cannot polish our skills … Deaf people would criticise our signing and the work we do … It is really frustrating.

While these comments show that those working as interpreters do reflect on their work, some interpreters may have very little awareness about the problem of their lack of signing fluency because they do not have sufficient training to realise this. One trained interpreter informant, who has an academic background of spoken language translation/interpretation, made the following comment:

> The biggest challenge we face is insufficient training … the training we have is too basic … Linguistic knowledge (about the differences between sign language and spoken language) is essential … Some SL interpreters, even after years of practicing, are still using the spoken language word order … Some people (including interpreters and laymen) think fast signing means good interpreting, but this is not correct.

This interpreter also stressed that:

> Training is not meant to be once and for all … it is an ongoing path for sign language interpreters to maintain their professional skills at all times.

The informant felt that, unfortunately, very few interpreters share her views on her workplace. But this lack of understanding for the need of continuing professional development is often a direct result of a lack of initial interpreter training.

Even for countries where interpreter training or education, and certification are well established, their systems still lag behind those of the more advanced western countries. Here is the comment by a Japanese deaf interpreter informant:

> In the United States, interpreters first pass the national certification test and then they can start to specialise in a particular setting. But in Japan, once you pass the certification, you basically work in any type of settings. There is no sense of specialisation. That is a problem. I think the ideal case is to be able to specialise. But here we still don't have that concept.

Clearly, there is a sense that there should be a generic interpreter test and then the opportunity to specialise, thus creating a clearer structured interpreter profession, with goals

for interpreters to achieve. Another challenge related to the lack of training is insufficient learning resources. One interpreter informant commented:

> In terms of the entire country … the challenges are that people don't have enough skills … Where can we go and look up for resources? We need resources, like a good sign-word dictionary that people can pay and learn to build their vocabularies … I don't think we have any in our country

Here we see identified that a good interpretation training programme needs to be supported by a large amount of learning resources (e.g., a lexical database, signing discourse data, materials that suit different interpreting settings). Nonetheless, sign language resources form only part of the resources that are needed, and these resources are lacking in many countries in Asia. We also need to have locally and nationally created appropriate interpreter training resources, including research in local contexts and written in local languages so that interpreters can improve their interpreting skills after gaining appropriate sign language fluency.

Conclusions and future directions

In this paper, we have provided an overview of SL interpretation training, testing, and accreditation in 20 Asian cities and/or countries, and the challenges confronting the interpreters. Our findings show that most places suffer from insufficient training, and a lack of testing and accreditation systems.

An SL interpreter training programme typically consists of four essential components, namely (a) enhancement of signing skills, (b) contrastive analysis of the target spoken and sign language pair, (c) interpretation techniques (monologic vs dialogic, different settings), and (d) codes of ethics. Depending on the availability of resources and expertise, the interpreter training found in Asian cities and/or countries may only cover some of these components, resulting in suboptimal training quality. These four components require different expertise:

- Deaf fluent signers for providing sign language training;
- Sign linguists who can document the signs and explicitly show how the local spoken language and sign language diverge from or similar to each other grammatically; and
- Experienced interpreter trainers for interpretation skills and codes of ethics.

On the other hand, to set up a testing and accreditation system, it is necessary to have a group of educated deaf and hearing individuals with professional knowledge of language assessment and interpretation skills evaluation.

In Asia, many countries are still developing in their economic and educational systems and so international support becomes essential, especially for the initial stages of developing SL interpreter training and education programmes. In fact, through our interviews, we identified a few cases of external scholars providing on-site support in setting up the interpretation training (e.g., Myanmar, Bhutan, and Vietnam). More international collaborations of this sort are required so that the training needs of sign language

interpreters are met and arecommensurate with the right of deaf people to have access to mainstream society.

In our interviews, we noted the importance of governmental commitments to the development of SL interpretation as a profession. In cities and/or countries which have a relatively more established system of training and accreditation (e.g., Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and Thailand), sign interpretation services are mainly supported by the governments. Such financial supports not only uphold the linguistic rights of deaf people, but also guarantee a relatively stable career path for people graduating from professional training programmes. The higher the level of training, the more time, and financial resources (i.e., tuition fees) are needed on the part of the students. If there is little prospect of a long-term career, it would be unrealistic to set up accredited training programmes in tertiary institutes and expect individuals to enrol.

All in all, raising the public awareness of the linguistic rights of deaf people, and advocating for the legal recognition of sign languages remain to be the cornerstone of any sustainable, long-term development on sign interpretation in Asia.

Questions for consideration

1. Is there any sign interpretation training, testing, and accreditation system in your own country? How are they compared with the situations in Asia as reported in this paper?
2. What strategies do you think Asian countries can adopt to enhance the sign interpretation training quality?
3. What are the essential features of a good SL interpretation system? How do we know how long and what academic level would be suitable for a particular country?
4. What constitutes a good SL interpretation accreditation system?
5. What roles can the Deaf community play in the development of SL interpretation training and accreditation?

Notes

1 We issued our invitation to the Asian SL interpreters through the informal communication network of WASLI (Asia) and our own personal contacts. As the participation was voluntary, we failed to make contacts with the sign interpreters of several countries (e.g., India, Palestine).
2 The National Research Association for Sign Language Interpretation published a journal entitled 'Research Journal on the Problems of Sign Language Interpretation in 2015 (www.zentsuken.net/global/pdf/en_journal.pdf), in which several authors shared their thoughts on several aspects of sign language interpretation in Japan.
3 Guidelines for sign language and interpretation training in Japan can be found at: www.mhlw.go.jp/bunya/shougaihoken/sanka/dl/shien02.pdf
4 The information comes from an online news article: https://udn.com/news/story/7314/5528946.
5 Information on the passing rate of Level C and B examinations can be found on the website of Taiwan Association of Sign Language Interpreters (http://taslifamily.org/?page_id=1471).
6 Information of the exam in South Korea can be found at: www.deafkorea.com/ver/_deaf/nation_test.html#map3.

Further reading

Stone, C. (2013). The UNCRPD and 'professional' sign language interpreter provision. In C. Schäffner, K. Kredens & Y. Fowler (Eds.), *Interpreting in a changing landscape* (pp. 83–100). John Benjamins Publishing Company

This article describes the UN CPRD and then explores professionalism within the context of the UK. While many interpreters in the UK may not have known much regarding the details of the UN CRPD there is a clear understanding of professionalism that is described from interpreters, and interpreter agency perspectives.

Roy, C. & Jemina, N. (Eds.). (2015). *The sign language interpreting studies reader*. John Benjamins.
The reader includes historic articles that discuss different aspects of sign language interpreting prior to the 21st century. It includes an early article from Japan by Shunsuke from 1968 that discusses interpreting as a right for deaf people from a Japanese perspective. The reader gives us a useful review of the theoretical developments as our understanding of sign language interpreting as a profession developed.

Napier, J., McKee, R. & Goswell, D. (2018). *Sign language interpreting: Theory and practice* (3rd rev. ed.). Federation Press.
This sign language interpreting textbook describes sign language interpreting from an Australasian perspective. It covers 21st century ideas of the skills, competence, and professionalism required to work as a sign language interpreter today.

Related topics

Sign language interpretation training, Asian sign languages, testing and accreditation system

References

Baliza, J. X. & Sison, C. (2019). *Working conditions and training profile of sign language interpreters in the Philippines: Shaping the quality of interpreting services and practice of profession.* Paper presented at WASLI Conference. Paris, France.

Chaiwatthanakunwanich, S. (2020). Assessment of standards for performance sign language interpreters 2018 (2561). *Journal Of Ratchasuda College for Research and Development of Persons With Disabilities*, *16*(2), 18–35.

Chua, T. S. (2014). *Shortage of qualified sign language interpreters in Malaysia.* (Unpublished manuscript). International Institute of Public Policy and Management, University of Malaya.

Eiichi, T., & Koide, S. (2009) Training of sign language interpreters in Japan: achievements and challenges. In J. Napier (Ed.), *International perspectives on sign language interpreter education* (pp. 190–9). Gallaudet University.

Fung, C. H.-M. (2014). *Sign interpreting in Hong Kong*. (Unpublished manuscript). Gallaudet University.

Moratto, R. (2020). *Taiwan Sign Language interpreting: Theoretical aspects and pragmatic issues*. Peter Lang Publishing Inc.

Tran, T. N. L. (2020). Sign language interpretation techniques. *Ho Chi Minh University of Education Journal of Science*, *17*(1), 186–96. (http://hcmup.edu.vn/images/stories/site_51/tapchi/XH/1.2020/19.tran%20thi%20ngoc%20lan%20recovered.pdf)

Tsuruma, I., & Yokkaichi, A. (2013). A Survey on current situation of training for sign language interpreters in Japan. *Interpreting and Translation Studies*, *13*, 97–114 (published in Japanese). http://jaits.jpn.org/home/kaishi2013/06_tsuruma-yokkoichi.pdf

WASLI-Asia [World Association of Sign Language Interpreters (Asia)]. (2015). *Situation of sign language interpreting in the Asian region* (https://wasli.org/asia, retrieved on 1st March 2020)