Bridging Communication Gaps in Crisis: A Case Study of Remote Interpreting in the Middle East During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

This study investigates the perceptions of remote interpreters regarding the impact of the transfer of interpreting mode from on-site mode to online mode. The study utilized an online survey and disseminated it online via online platforms, targeting interpreters in Middle Eastern countries. The survey collected information about the primary mode of remote interpreting practice, the frequency of interpreting services during COVID-19, the leading interpreting platforms, and major remote interpreting clients. It also gathered information about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on interpreting services, the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic on interpreting services, and recommendations for the future of remote interpreting during global crises and emergencies. The study found that most interpreting services are via Zoom, Telephone, and Kudo. Moreover, the major clients for remote interpreting were healthcare providers and international organizations. On the other hand, the study revealed that the main impacts of COVID-19 on interpreting were the transition to remote interpreting services, cancellations and postpones of interpreting events, economic impact (a decline in income), security, data privacy, and confidentiality. Moreover, the main challenges were technological limitations, lack of non-verbal communication, and physical and mental health. The study recommends that it is imperative to develop resilient systems that efficiently integrate remote interpreting into crisis response strategies.

Keywords: Remote Interpreting, COVID-19, Interpreting in the Middle East, pandemic, communication

1. Introduction

The worldwide emergence of COVID-19 in 2020 and its succeeding surges presented unparalleled difficulties, requiring inventive strategies to sustain communication in the face of social distancing protocols (René de Cotret, Beaudoin-Julien, & Leanza, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic, triggered by the new coronavirus SARS-CoV-2, compelled governments, healthcare providers, and organizations across the globe to adjust quickly to the changing circumstances. As authorities enforced several public health interventions, including lockdowns, quarantine regulations, and vaccination programs, the necessity for unambiguous and precise communication surpassed language barriers (Buján & Collard, 2023). This case study examines the experience of Arab remote interpreters during the COVID-19 pandemic, providing insights into its implementation, encountered problems, and its global influence on communities.

Interpreting

Interpreting is translating spoken language, facilitating immediate communication between different languages. There are two primary methods of interpreting: simultaneous and consecutive. Simultaneous interpreting entails the interpreter conveying the message in the target language immediately and concurrently with the ongoing speech of the speaker. This technique is employed in extensive conferences, governmental meetings, or any other event when the duration and progression of the meeting are of utmost importance (Pöchhacker, 2022). Conversely, consecutive interpreting necessitates the interpreter to patiently await the completion of the speaker's discourse before translating it into the desired language. This technique is frequently employed in smaller business meetings, court proceedings, and other contexts where more interactive interpreting is appropriate (Scientific, 2023). Moreover, interpreting is delivered in three ways: On-site interpreting, the most common modality which requires all parties to be physically present in the place; (b) telephone interpreting or over-the-phone interpreting; and (c) video interpreting (Aminzadeh, 2023, 75).

Remote Interpreting

Remote interpreting is a technique that enables interpretation services to be delivered from a distance, employing diverse technologies to promote communication between individuals who speak different languages. Remote interpreting services have proven essential in various industries, notably healthcare, by surmounting linguistic obstacles and enabling effective communication among patients,

healthcare providers, and other experts. Moreover, remote interpreting has facilitated businesses' access to a worldwide audience, engaging with clients who speak many languages, and organizing international phone conversations or conferences (Pöchhacker, 2022). Remote interpreting is often regarded as an effective and forward-thinking method of providing interpretation services. It enables interpreters to operate from any location with an internet connection, while participants can access the interpretation via video conferencing technologies (Wehrmeyer, 2023). Remote interpreting encompasses two primary modalities: video remote interpreting (VRI) and over-the-phone interpretation (OPI) (Amato, Spinolo, & Rodrǵuez, 2018). On the one hand, VRI utilizes video technology to deliver interpretation services. On the other hand, OPI is a telephonic interpretation service that enables interpreters to engage in voice calls with participants. This methodology has been employed for an extended duration and is regarded as a more conventional technique of remote interpretation (Amato et al., 2018; Pöchhacker, 2022, Olimat et al, 2023).

Remote Interpreting during CVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic immensely impacted remote interpreting industry, resulting in a massive transition from traditional in-person to remote methods. As a result of the measures implemented to control virus transmission, most of the interpreting processes that would typically take place in person were shifted to distant platforms. The transformation was especially remarkable in healthcare settings, as there was a significant increase in the demand for remote interpreting services (Hale, Goodman-Delahunty, Martschuk, & Lim, 2022). For example, the Royal Melbourne Hospital in Australia experienced a significant surge in video translating appointments, escalating from an average of 10-15 per month before the pandemic to a range of 100-200 per month during the pandemic (translations, 2021). The increased remote interpreting services facilitated efficient communication with those with low English proficiency, potentially leading to decreased hospitalizations and fatalities.

The COVID-19 pandemic has encouraged the establishment and application of best practices and recommendations for remote interpretation. The International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC) has issued rules prioritizing the well-being and safety of interpreters and technicians, providing high-quality services, and adhering to relevant ISO standards (AIIC, 2021). These recommendations aim to prioritize the welfare of interpreters and participants in additition to upholding the efficiency of remote interpreting services during the worldwide health crisis (Hale et al., 2022). The pandemic not only expedited the implementation of remote interpreting but also underlined its vital role in improving communication across multiple sectors, including healthcare, legal, and business, particularly in the face of extraordinary problems provided by the COVID-19 pandemic (translations, 2021).

2. Literature Review

Several scholars have tackled the significance of interpreting as a means of verbal communication in the previous decades. However, to the authors' knowledge, there are no thorough studies that specifically tackle the state of interpreting in the Middle East; this highlights the significance of the study in filling the gap.

The COVID-19 panademic has led to more studies investigating the profound influence of remote interpreting on many industries. The use of remote interpreting has grown significantly in healthcare environments, driven by the need to reduce the risk of infection, and overcome linguistic barriers through remote medical interpreting. Implementing remote interpreting has eradicated limitations imposed by time and distance, enabling organizations and people to promptly avail Arabic interpretation services (Services, 2023).

Renéde Cotret et al. (2020) established a framework for remotely interpreting public service challenges in Quebec, Canada. Twenty-seven interpreters participated in focus groups and individual talks, where a range of recommendations from the literature were considered. Examining the participants' discourse validated the applicability of existing recommendations, provided further clarification on certain proposals, and introduced seven additional recommendations. The Guide to the Planning and Practice of Remote Public Service Interpreting comprises ten recommendations regarding the planning and administration of remote interpreting services and 25 guidelines concerning the actual interaction. The findings indicated that remote interpreting encompasses not only telecommunications technology but also the expertise and abilities required to oversee and manage the utilization of that technology in particular professional settings while mitigating the impact of virtual presence and promoting the dissemination of information among essential participants through clearly defined communication channels (Almahasees & Jaccomard, 2020).

Ait Ammour (2021) evaluated the contribution of remote healthcare interpreters in combating the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in nations with linguistic diversity and several primary languages. The study revealed that health sectors depended heavily on these interpreters, and there was a special emphasis on the dependability of these interpreters in facilitating communication with foreign patients who have limited language skills using efficient on-site interpreting. It concluded that healthcare interpreters offer patients and medical professionals a precious service. Amid exceptional emergencies like the COVID-19 pandemic, it is imperative to recognize healthcare interpreting services as unquestionably "essential."

Khlaifat (2021) examined the effects of the COVID-19 panademic on the transformation of job dynamics, social interactions, economic circumstances, and technology utilization among Arab sign language interpreters. A digital survey was developed, ensuring its accuracy and consistency, and administered to (115) sign language interpreters in several Arab nations. The study revealed that the Coronavirus pandemic had a detrimental effect on various aspects, such as the transformation of work, economic situations, social connections, and the utilization of technology in remote interpreting. The impact on financial conditions was particularly significant, while the influence on social relations and technology usage in distant interpreting was moderately pronounced. The findings also revealed no statistically significant disparities, at a significance level of $\alpha \leq 0.05$, in the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic on altering the characteristics of work,

economic circumstances, social interactions, and the utilization of technology in distant interpretation.

3. Methodology

This study uses an anonymous online survey that primarily focuses on qualitative analysis. The main objective is to identify and analyze trends, as previously mentioned. The survey questionnaire was written in English and consisted of 14 predominantly open-ended questions designed to gather substantial qualitative data.

Design of the survey

Google Forms was sused for creating and managing the online survey due to its user-friendly survey design capabilities and efficient data processing. Additionally, participants are likely to be acquainted with this widely used platform in delivering interpreting services during crises. The participants were asked to answer questions based on their experience.

Participants

Fifty replies were collected, revealing that 90% of the respondents engaged in remote interpreting during the COVID-19 pandemic. The prevailing language combination for remote interpreting is English to Arabic. The most significant proportion of participants was in the age range of 45 to 60 years (60%), followed by those aged between 25 and 40 (35%), and finally those above the age of 60 (5%). In general, 65% of the sample comprised individuals aged 41 or older. Women comprised the majority (75%), while men comprised 25% of the sample. According to the responses, 65% of the individuals surveyed had over ten years of professional experience, while 26% had 31 and 35 years of experience.

Questionnaire Validity

This initial version of the survey was piloted by a group of three experts in the field, who reviewed the survey items, and their provided feedback was implemented accordingly.

4. Analysis

This section analyzes Arab remote interpreters' experience during COVID-19. The first part collects general information about remote interpreting practices amidst COVID-19. The second part analyses interpreters' answers to the main challenges, strategies for coping with remote interpreting tasks, and lessons learned to deal with remote interpreting in crises.

Section 1: The Practice of Remote Interpreting

Remote interpreting and its various modes amidst COVID-19

Figure 1 shows that all participants accomplished remote interpreting tasks amidst COVID-19 in the Arab region. The most common remote interpreting mode was remote simultaneous interpreting by 33 (66%), followed by remote consecutive interpreting by 12 (26%), remote sight interpreting by 3 (6%), and then remote bilateral interpreting for business by 2 (4%). This finding aligns with (Mahyub Rayaa & Martin, 2022) that remote simultaneous interpreting is the most common one during the COVID-19 crisis.
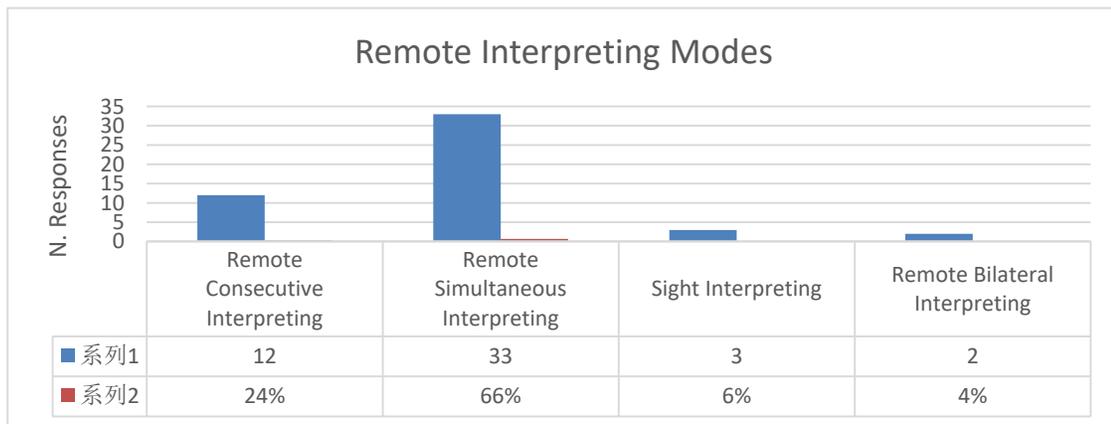

Figure 1. Remote Interpreting Modes

Frequency of conducting Remote Interpreting amidst COVID-19

The study also indicated that most respondents conducted remote interpreting services weekly at 56%, followed by a daily basis at 28 %, and then monthly at 16% as shown in Figure 2.

Frequency of conducting Remote Interpreting Tasks amidst COVID-19

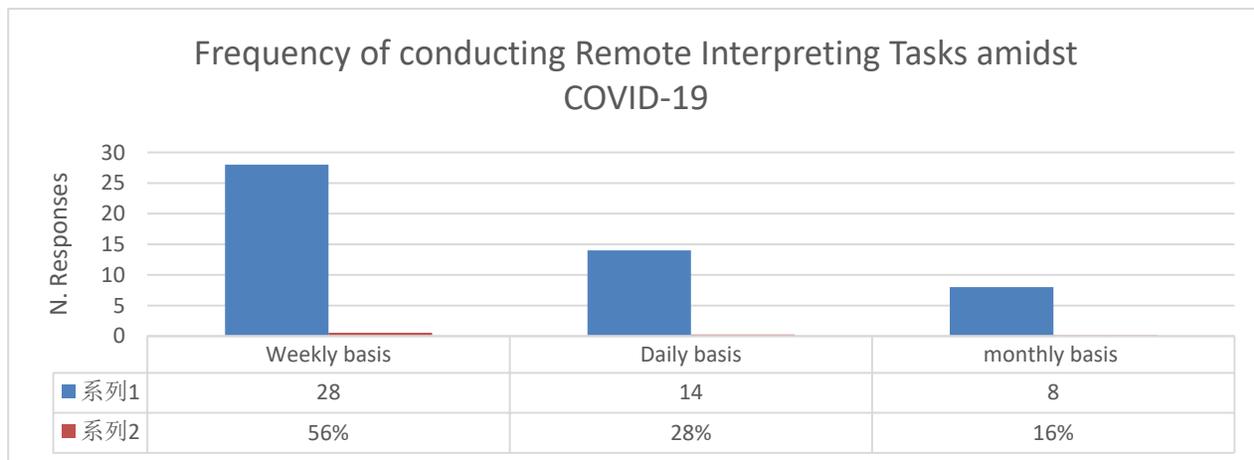|	Weekly basis	Daily basis	monthly basis
■ 系列1	28	14	8
■ 系列2	56%	28%	16%

Figure 2. Frequency of conducting Remote Interpreting Tasks amidst COVID-19

The main Remote interpreting platforms amidst COVID-19

Figure 3 illustrates the primary interpreting platforms used in remote interpreting amidst COVID-19. Zoom occupies the most common platform with 48%, followed by telephone at 24%, KUDO at 10%, while interaction, voice boxer, and finally Interprefy have 6% each.

REMOTE INTERPRETING PLATFORMS

Interactio 6%
VoiceBoxer 6%
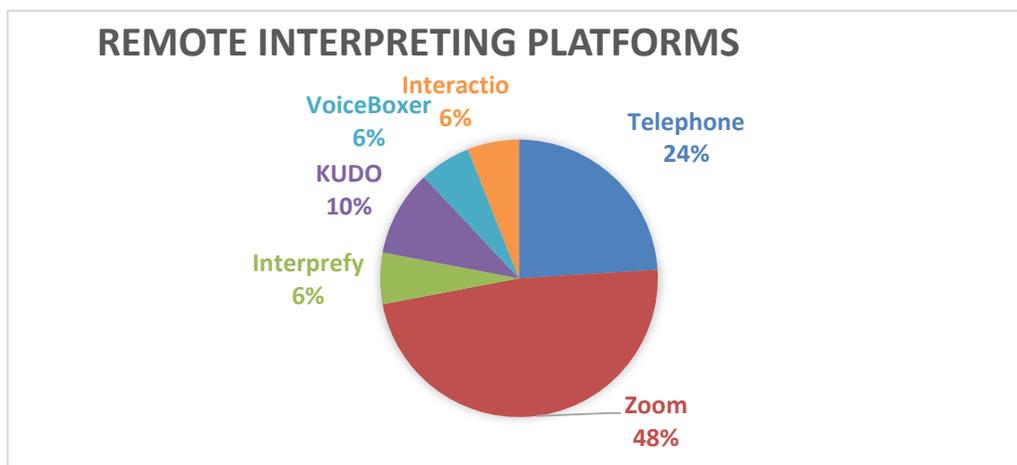KUDO 10%
Interprefy 6%
Telephone 24%
Zoom 48%

Figure 3. Remote Interpreting Platforms

Major Remote interpreting Clients.

This statement gathered information about the primary clients that required remote interpreting services amidst COVID-19, as shown in Figure 4.
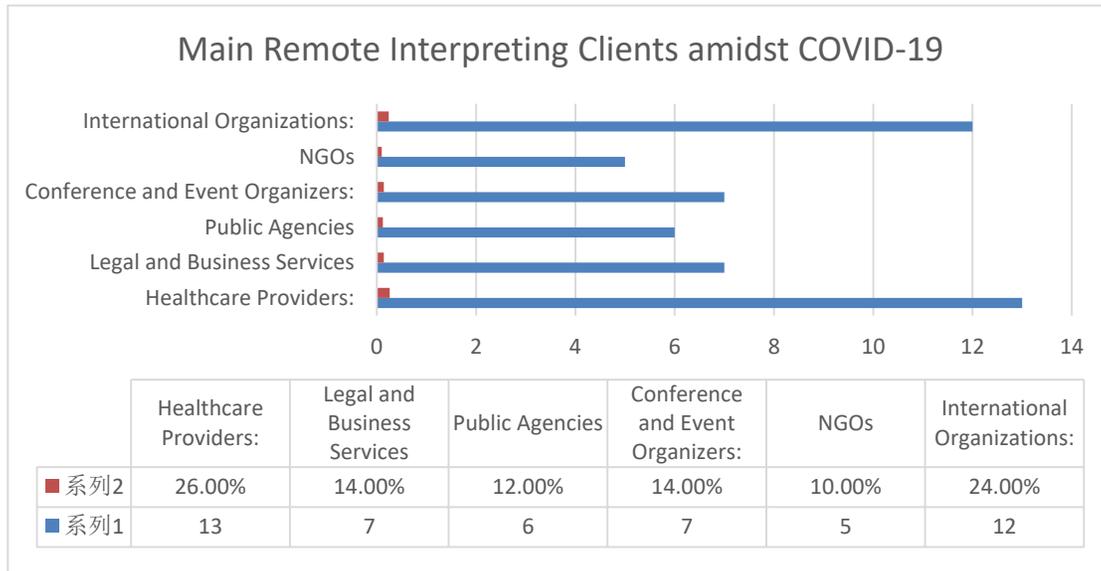
Figure 4. The main Clients of the Remote Interpreting service

The graph displays the primary categories of remote interpreting clients and their respective proportions of demand, which include healthcare providers, legal and business services, public agencies, conference and event organizers, NGOs, and international organizations. The graph shows that remote interpreters conducted most of their services for health care providers at 26%, international organizations at 24%, legal and business services, and conference and event organizers at 14% each. Then, public agencies are at 12%, and lastly, NGOS are at 10%.

Section 2: Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Interpreting Services

This section presents the answers of remote interpreters on four questions relating to their experience as remote interpreters.

Question 1: *"What is the effect of the COVID-19 panademic on your capacity to deliver interpreting services comparable to in-person interpreting services?"*

Question one pertains to the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on the capacity of interpreters to offer interpreting services and whether these remote or online services are equivalent to conventional in-person interpreting. Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, various facets of everyday life, such as employment and interaction, saw substantial transformations. The emergence of this ordeal also impacted the field of interpreting. The answers are varied, and the authors choose the most common answers from the survey respondents.

A. *Transition to Remote Interpreting Services*

The widespread adoption of remote translating services is a common consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, the pandemic necessitated a shift towards remote work and virtual communication to comply with social distancing measures. Interpreting services have shifted from traditional, in-person settings to virtual ones. Adopting remote interpreting services has both advantageous and disadvantageous effects on interpreters. The practice of remote interpreting has distinct obstacles, including the absence of non-verbal signals, a dearth of contextual information, and the necessity to manage several technologies, all of which can have a detrimental effect on the caliber of their performance, which is in line with (ATA, 2021). However, it offers improved privacy, more access to high-quality interpreting services, and greater efficiency, especially in hospitals. Video interpretation has been found to decrease organizational barriers and improve access to skilled interpreters. This result also aligns with (Feiring & Westdahl, 2020).

B. *Cancellations and Postpone of Interpreting Events*

Due to the outbreak, the transition to remote interpreting services has resulted in the cancellation and rescheduling of in-person interpreting activities. However, remote interpreting has made it easier for businesses to reach a wider audience. It has allowed more people to participate in online events without paying excessively high entrance fees. This result also agrees with (TalkingIdeas, 2023). Moreover, the COVID-19 panademic has partially contributed to the rising popularity of remote interpreting technology providers and the utilization of remote interpreting. These results agree with (ATA, 2021; Mahyub Rayaa & Martin, 2022).

C. Economic Impact (a decline in income)

Implementing remote interpreting services has had a varied effect on the financial situation of interpreters. Remote interpreting is a cost-effective substitute for other interpreting services as it avoids the necessity of incurring trip fees. This result aligns with (InterpretCloud, 2021). However, the outbreak has led to the termination of contracts and the cancellation of work, leading to

significant financial losses of millions of dollars for translation service providers. Adopting remote interpreting has facilitated business growth by enabling them to broaden their service offerings and establish connections with a more extensive clientele, potentially mitigating specific financial challenges. This finding also aligns with (LatitudePrime, 2020).

D. Security, Data Privacy and Confidentiality

Implementing remote interpreting services has raised significant concerns about security, data privacy, and confidentiality. IRONHACK (2023) showed that interpreting companies are highly important in selecting secure platforms, enforcing strict access controls, and conducting regular security audits to safeguard data privacy and security. Preserving the confidentiality of remote interpreting is crucial, especially when handling delicate information like personal medical records and financial data. Ensuring all stored data's dependability, precision, and protection is paramount. This is in line with (Langauge, 2022). The study recommends that remote interpreting service providers prioritize complying with the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), conducting thorough security audits, and offering continuous security training to both interpreters and staff members as emphasized by (English, 2022). Moreover,   Interpreters should adhere to ethical principles and legal responsibilities to protect confidentiality as incurred (Smith, 2023).

Section Three: Challenges of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Interpreting Services

Question 1: *What are the main challenges interpreters face in remote interpreting services?*

Question one aims to identify the main challenges interpreters face while doing remote interpreting services. The survey collected several challenges. However, the authors chose the most common challenges that were faced among interpreters: Technological limitations, the lack of non-verbal communication, and physical and mental health.

A.   Technological Limitations

The efficacy of remote interpretation relies heavily on the technological infrastructure. Technical issues, such as insufficient internet connectivity, can disrupt the smoothness of communication and adversely affect the quality of interpretation. This finding aligns with (Interpreter, 2023) that poor internet connection disrupts the smooth flow of interpreting.

B.   Lack of Non-Verbal Communication

Face-to-face interpreting allows for the recognition of non-verbal cues, such as facial expressions and body language, which boost the accuracy of interpretation. The shift to distant situations led to a lack of these visual cues, potentially impacting the depth and quality of communication. This result aligns with (Interpreter, 2023) that the lack of non-verbal signs affects interpreters' performance.

C.   Physical and Mental Health

Interpreter tiredness was caused by the prolonged periods of distant interpreting, frequently without sufficient pauses. Interpreters' physical and mental health emerged as a significant issue, requiring the implementation of techniques to handle their workload and uphold their emotional well-being effectively. This result is also supported by on-site and remote interpreting research, which aligns with (Chen, 2023).

Section Four: Challenges of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Interpreting Services

Question 1: *What strategies did you employ to overcome challenges in remote interpreting?*

A.   Adaptability and Flexibility

Remote interpreting necessitates interpreters possessing adaptability and flexibility, as they must acclimate to novel technology, workflows, and obstacles. Interpreters had to familiarize themselves with and adjust to novel remote interpreting platforms and technologies, guaranteeing all participants a smooth and uninterrupted experience. Interpreters are advised to utilize visual aids and exchange materials beforehand if feasible. This facilitated the improvement of comprehension and guaranteed higher precision in interpretation. This is also in line with (Shaw & Halley, 2021).

B.   Technology Proficiency

Remote interpreting requires adaptation and flexibility, as they must adjust to new technology, workflows, and challenges. Interpreters had to acquaint themselves with and adapt to new remote interpreting platforms and technologies, ensuring a seamless and uninterrupted experience for all participants. Interpreters should use visual aids and share materials in advance, if possible. This enabled the enhancement of understanding and ensured greater accuracy in interpretation.

Section Five: Recommendations for the Future of Remote Interpreting during Global Crises and Emergencies

The future of remote interpreting depends on the combination of advanced technology and strategic teamwork to effectively handle the challenges of emergencies. Investing in advanced AI and machine learning is crucial for improving the effectiveness of remote interpreting in emergencies. These technologies have the potential to completely transform the field of real-time language processing, allowing interpreters to provide essential information quickly and precisely. There is a need to create global collaboration platforms specifically designed for remote interpreting. These platforms should have safe, user-friendly interfaces that enable smooth communication between interpreters and clients. Prioritizing integration with telehealth and telemedicine systems is crucial to ensure

that remote interpreting becomes essential to providing healthcare services during disasters. Ensuring the ongoing dedication to the advancement of interpreters is crucial, encompassing technical expertise, cultural aptitude, and ethical deliberations. Implementing standardized standards and principles will strengthen the ethical basis of remote interpreting. Additionally, collaborating across different sectors and sharing information will foster a unified and knowledgeable approach to addressing linguistic difficulties in crises. The future viability of remote interpreting services depends on a comprehensive approach that integrates technological advancements, ethical deliberations, and collaborative partners.

To successfully deploy remote interpreting in emergencies, it is imperative to have a forward-thinking attitude and alter our understanding of communication in such instances. A future suggestion is to develop resilient systems that efficiently integrate remote interpretation into crisis response strategies. To achieve this, firms should prioritize the development of redundant systems and comprehensive resilience policies, ensuring the continuous provision of interpretation services even in the face of technological challenges. Furthermore, prioritizing community engagement and cultural sensitivity and recognizing the diverse linguistic needs of people affected by catastrophes are essential. Training programs for interpreters should incorporate modules on cultural competence and community engagement to foster a nuanced understanding of the populations they serve. With the advancement of technology, it is crucial to develop defined rules for remote interpreting services. This guarantees a cohesive and morally sound structure for such services. This progressive method presents remote interpreting as a linguistic answer and a vital component of crisis management. It has the ability to efficiently handle complex language details while upholding the principles of accuracy, cultural appropriateness, and flexibility.

5. Conclusion

Remote interpreting has become essential for overcoming communication obstacles during emergencies, such as the current COVID-19 pandemic. However, remote interpreting has highlighted the specific challenges and sensitivities related to interpreting for mental health. The consequences experienced by interpreters and administrators throughout the outbreak have been thoroughly documented, encompassing stress, adverse emotional health, and physical difficulties.

Remote interpreters can prioritize their psychological well-being by addressing their physical, mental, and emotional requirements, setting boundaries, finding support, and continuously improving their interpreting skills and knowledge.

Remote interpreting has several benefits, including flexibility, cost-effectiveness, and convenient accessibility, in spite of its potential challenges. Connecting interpreting and other organizations has substantially invested in state-of-the-art technical infrastructure to ensure seamless, ongoing remote interpreting services. However, persistent challenges require attention, such as guaranteeing reliable internet connectivity and accurately capturing non-verbal cues.

To sum up, the key to successful global communication in the future lies in effectively overcoming language barriers. Remote interpreting has proven to be a valuable method for addressing these differences. Nevertheless, it is imperative to prioritize the well-being of interpreters working remotely and continuously improve the technology and resources available to them. By adopting this strategy, we can ensure that remote interpreting remains vital for surmounting communication obstacles during critical periods.

Authors' contributions

Dr. Zakaryia Almahasees was responsible for the study design and revision. Dr. Mouad Al-Natour was responsible for data collection. Dr. Sameh Mahmoud drafted the manuscript and Dr. Sirvan Aminzadeh revised it. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Obtained.

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The Publication Ethics Committee of the Sciedu Press.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

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The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding authors. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

Open access

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