Video Remote Interpreting

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Purpose of this Document

The purpose of this document is to provide general information about American Sign Language-English video remote interpreting services and to set out recommendations for working conditions that promote effective and sustainable quality interpreting services for all users, subsequently maintaining the health and wellbeing of interpreters working in these environments. It is intended to provide important information for consumers regarding the appropriate application of video remote interpreting, as well as to guide professional practice and decision making for interpreters.

Video Relay Services versus Video Remote Interpreting

Technology has affected the provision of interpreting services for both spoken and signed language interpreters, specifically through the development of video relay services (VRS) and video remote interpreting (VRI).

1. *Video Relay Services[1]*

   The Canadian Radio and Telecommunication Commission (CRTC), the federal regulator of video relay services in Canada, describes VRS as a: basic telecommunications service that enables (deaf) people who use sign language and (hearing) telephone users to communicate. The deaf caller connects to a VRS interpreter operator using Internet-based videoconferencing software. The hearing caller connects to the VRS interpreter through conventional phone services.

   Regardless of who is initiating the call, the interpreter is able to connect the line through to the other party and interprets the conversation[2]. Napier et al (2018) describe VRS calls as "hybrid-media calls, whereby videoconferencing technology is used between the deaf caller and interpreter, while the hearing caller has no access to visual information and is expected to treat the call like any other telephone conversation."

   VRS in Canada, implemented in 2016, is classified as a telecommunication service and, as such, is not an interpreting service option when participants are in the same location. Further, VRS was not designed for assignments that are lengthy or complex in nature, such as staff meetings, legal processes, or medical or paramedical appointments. VRS is free.

2. *Video Remote Interpreting[3]*

   VRI is an interpreting service provided via any number of videoconferencing platforms, where at least one person, often the interpreter, is at a separate location. VRI may be arranged in different ways, such as pre-booked appointments or on-demand service. Payment for service may be structured in different ways as well, including per minute, per hour, negotiated contracts, rate plans, or based on individual usage (RID 2010).

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[1] Three-way telephone or videoconference Interpreter-mediated communication using only spoken languages is referred to as teleconference interpreting, telephone interpreting or videoconference interpreting. Video Remote Interpreting is the term used for sign language interpreting for video conferencing services. Interpreting phone calls using sign language interpreter operators is referred to as video relay services (Braun, 2015).

[2] https://crtc.gc.ca/eng/phone/acces/rela.htm accessed May 2019

[3] Also referred to as distance interpreting by the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC).

Currently, VRI services are not regulated by CRTC or any other supervising body, therefore, standards of service and quality can vary significantly. For both spoken and signed language interpreters, there is an increased demand for interpreting services via VRI (Braun, 2015), hence the need to educate the public to ensure that the service is provided in an effective manner. The sections that follow are intended to outline the professional and technical standards necessary to ensure a successful VRI experience.

Ensuring a Successful VRI Experience

Regardless of the setting, when accepting assignments sign language interpreters must ensure they have the linguistic and interpreting competence, as well as the requisite experience in the setting. They must observe the ethical and professional conduct standards set out by the Canadian Association of Sign Language Interpreters[4] (CASLI). These expectations extend to VRI assignments. Additionally, in order to ensure a successful VRI experience, interpreters also need to understand the benefits and limitations of VRI, the established protocols for delivering remote interpreting services, how to prepare in advance of assignments, the staffing requirements (whether the assignment requires more than one interpreter), training on the equipment to be used, technical set-up, internet connectivity, and the processes to be implemented if VRI is not successful.

Benefits and Limitations of VRI

Several organizations, including the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) and the USA-based Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) have outlined the benefits and limitations of using VRI services. For example, VRI is beneficial by providing interpretation for areas where there are no qualified sign language interpreters, or where the logistics or costs to bring an interpreter on site are prohibitive. It can provide fast and accessible communication and may be the best alternative in an emergency (until an interpreter can arrive on-site). However, as the WFD and RID have stated, it is not a comprehensive replacement for on-site interpreting, and numerous factors must be considered before using this option in high-stake settings such as legal[5] or medical. Even assuming all the technical requirements are in place, decisions about the use of VRI require input from __*all*__ parties. VRI may **not** be appropriate for:

- Situations involving multiple participants with an expectation of high levels of interaction among the parties, with less structured turn-taking protocols;
- Situations where the participant(s) have additional factors to consider, such as a vision or cognitive conditions;
- Situations where the content and interaction are highly sensitive;
- Situations where one or more parties is intoxicated with drugs and/or alcohol; and
- Settings where the consequences of errors are grave (RID, 2010);
- Situations that requires parties to move to different locations, or changing physical positions (e.g. many medical and work-place situations);
- Situations where one or more of the parties' function is affected by medications;
- Situations working with children.

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[4] Formerly known as the Association of Visual Language Interpreters of Canada (AVLIC); name change ratified July 2016.

[5] See Napier (2011) for research and recommendations regarding remote interpreting in the legal setting.

Settings where VRI has been successful, when all of the professional and technical standards have been put in place, include (but are not limited to):

- Meetings between lawyers and clients to prepare for a trial;
- Brief interactions at a Court Management Office to file a set of documents or establish a court appearance date;
- Bail hearings that are non-complex;
- Interviews between a prospective job seeker and an employer;
- Meetings in the business / employment setting;
- Board, committee, council meetings for organizations;
- On-going counseling appointments where the therapist and deaf client have previously met face-to-face, and have established a working relationship prior to using VRI;
- Interactions between service providers and their consumers (e.g. stores, counter service);
- Routine, non-complex one-to-one health-related appointments;
- Educational settings, presentations, lectures.

Professional Practice Standards

As with onsite interpreting, interpreters must take the necessary steps to maintain quality and professional standards. The following guidelines are crucial in ensuring the best possible outcomes for a VRI assignment:

- Participants and interpreters require a shared knowledge of the session content. This means a high-level summary of the context, and the documents that will be discussed, must be shared with interpreters in advance of appointments. As in the community setting, booking the same interpreters for regularly occurring assignments is often advantageous as this knowledge and background can be carried over.

- Technical aspects need to be planned to ensure high-speed broadband connections or ISDN lines to carry both video and audio messages. The use of WIFI is not recommended as the quality of the video (sign language) and audio reception can be dramatically altered when relying on WIFI. All participants need to be familiar with the technology being used and it is recommended that an on-site technical support person be available. Equipment needs to be tested in advance of assignments. Predetermined back-up plans should be in place should the technology fail.

- Lighting and seating arrangements need to ensure clear sight lines between interpreters and deaf participants and microphones need to be sufficient in number and quality for the interpreter(s) to hear all participants in the setting, as well as for the interpreter to be heard when interpreting ASL to English.

- Background audio and visual distractions must be mitigated. For example, patterned backgrounds on walls behind the deaf consumer, or ill-placed lighting fixtures or sunlight from windows, can interfere with comprehension of sign language. Participants shuffling paper or tapping pens near microphones interferes with the audio of the speakers, so these and other noisy behaviours need to be controlled.

- Camera angles must allow the interpreter(s) to see all participants, optimally one video monitor with a full picture view of the deaf participant(s) and another video monitor for the view of the other meeting participants. This creates the necessary *sense of presence* between the 'real' environment and the remote 'virtual' environment, which is vital for good performance (Moser-Mercer, 2003, 2005; Mouzourakis, 2006). By providing the necessary video and audio access, the interpreter can assess the nature of the interactions and interpersonal relationships by drawing on contextual information such as physical characteristics, posture, gaze, and facial expressions when determining intent and tone of the source message (Setton, 1999). This includes

access to back-channeling[6] which helps the interpreter to assess the success of their interpretation (Braun, 2015). Chernov's (2004) research in distance (video remote) interpreting in spoken-language conference settings shows that a lack of relevant contextual information forces the interpreter to resort to guesswork and to exert more energy in cognitive processing and self-monitoring; these factors have been shown to apply to sign language remote interpreting as well (Braun, 2007).

- Consistent use of qualified interpreters[7] with the appropriate skills and credentials for the setting, including the application of team interpreting protocols[8] where appropriate is paramount. In situations where a team of interpreters will be needed, the interpreters are required to be in the same (remote) location in order to provide the most effective interpretation.

- In situations requiring a specialized team of deaf/non-deaf interpreters seating arrangements and camera angles will need to ensure the deaf interpreter is visible to the deaf consumer, and that the deaf interpreter can see the non-deaf pivot language interpreter[9]. Finally, because the deaf/non-deaf team will be sitting opposite each other, both interpreters will require two video monitors (four in total) – as articulated above, this is to achieve the optimal 'sense of presence' for each of them.

- Care must be taken regarding the length of the assignment that is interpreted in this format. VRI causes more fatigue for the interpreter due to the extra cognitive load for interpreters working remotely (Moser-Mercer, 2003). A sufficient number of interpreters need to be booked to ensure the delivery of high-quality interpreting services, and sufficient rest breaks must be built into the scheduled event.

Dispelling the Myths of VRI

It is easier – the interpreter can work from home.
VRI is not easier than onsite interpreting. The work requires the same professional standards, including preparation work, decision-making skills, and the necessary competencies to provide interpreting services in that particular context. In addition, as mentioned earlier, research has identified the work as being more complex, and fatiguing (Moser-Mercer, 2003). Signed languages, such as American Sign Language (ASL) and Langue des signes québécoise (LSQ), are visual-spatial languages, they are three-dimensional languages. Sign languages transmitted via a video screen, technically, provides only a two-dimensional format, which may have an effect on how well the interpreter (or any viewer) can comprehend the language used (Mouzourakis, 2006).

It is cheaper – interpreters will lower their fees given they are working at home.
The fees set by interpreters are an individual matter, and interpreters may use a range of fees commensurate with the demands of the interpreting setting; however, the CASLI Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Professional Conduct[10] addresses overcharging or undercutting, as well as other business practices that undermine the integrity of the profession.

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[6] Backchanneling is the listeners' response to the speakers' message indicating their level of understanding or agreement, such as head nodding or shaking, facial expressions of puzzlement, smiling, squirming in chair, eye gaze, posture, etc.

[7] See National Consortium of Interpreter Education Centers (December 31, 2008) for studies done in the USA regarding the requisite skills, knowledge and experience required for video relay interpreters.

[8] See Russell (2011) article printed in *AVLIC News.*

[9] See Stone and Russell (2014) for a detailed discussion of the work of deaf-non-deaf interpreting teams.

[10] http://www.avlic.ca/ethics-and-guidlines/english

It is secure.

Not all videoconferencing platforms are secure. In fact, many reputable interpreter service agencies and businesses have developed proprietary software to ensure that privacy and security measures meet government standards, for example, when providing VRI in a hospital or in a courthouse. Platforms such as Skype, FaceTime, Zoom or Appear.in, for example, can all be "hacked" providing no guarantee of privacy. In addition, there is no market standard for minimum connectivity when using VRI, allowing for varying WIFI and LTE strength to affect the effectiveness of VRI in a given situation. Interpreters without secure, private offices are encouraged to only accept VRI assignments where they can go to a dedicated videoconference facility, for example, one that is already established and supported in a digitally secure location.

Any interpreter can work VRI.

The most experienced interpreters find VRI interpreting challenging (Napier, Skinner, Braun, 2018), so it is not recommended for novice interpreters or practitioners who are less linguistically capable and/or inexperienced to accept work in this setting. Interpreters need to be highly competent in the use of both consecutive and simultaneous interpreting, in order to make the best decisions that can result in effective and accurate interpretation (Russell, 2005; Roberson, Russell, & Shaw, 2014). CASLI encourages members to pursue developing their skills in VRI like they would for any other domain, by working with Deaf and interpreter mentors and seeking experiences with skilled teamers.

In addition, interpreters working in specific settings may have additional requirements for training and certification. For example, the CASLI position on *Interpreting Legal Discourse and Working in Legal Settings*[11] states that preference must be given for interpreters that hold the Certificate of Interpretation (COI) and have significant training and experience in legal work. Interpreters lacking the specialized training and/or experience are ethically bound to turn down assignments for which they are not qualified.

Canadian versus American VRI Service Providers

The standards of practice differ between Canada and the USA, as do the certification criteria and codes of conduct. For example, the American RID Certificate of Interpretation exam certifies basic competencies, so it is possible for interpreters with a few months of experience to pass, whereas the Canadian certification standard is far higher; typically, interpreters require at least five years of quality experience prior to achieving a pass. The reason for this difference lies in the focus of the testing: RID tests for entry level competence, while CASLI tests for interpreting mastery.

In addition to differences in certification standards, RID and CASLI promote different codes of conduct. As such, American interpreters and service providers may not be familiar with the ethics, professional conduct and interpreting practice expectations in Canada. Therefore, American interpreters providing VRI services in Canada should be active members of CASLI in order to acknowledge that Canadian standards are maintained.

In addition, there are significant nuanced linguistic and cultural differences between Canadian and American discourse. For example, signed language lexicon can vary dramatically between the two countries, creating situations where US interpreters may be unfamiliar with sign choices used by deaf consumers in Canada which can lead to misunderstandings and errors. The same could be true for the English lexicon. Further, differences in

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[11] http://www.avlic.ca/sites/default/files/docs/AVLIC-Interpreting_Legal_Discourse%26Working_in_Legal_Settings.pdf

discourse style and pragmatic knowledge[12] can significantly skew the accuracy of the interpretation if misrepresented or misunderstood.

Finally, the Canadian and USA legal, medical, governmental, etc. systems are different and interpreters in the US will not likely have had training or be familiar with the Canadian systems, processes and institutions. Without that context and content knowledge, the risk of interpreting errors increases dramatically.

Professional Development

In keeping with the CASLI Code of Conduct and Guidelines for Professional Practice, interpreters should set out annual, as well as multi-year professional development plans with at least one stated objective (if not already achieved) to include passing the CASLI Certificate of Interpretation (COI). Setting aside time on a regular basis to review research, journals, articles, videos, books, web and pod casts, etc. will help maintain currency in the field. Establishing local professional practice communities can deepen learning by gathering colleagues to discuss interpreting, cultural, social, workplace topics or trends. Training and skills development lead to increased capacity to manage the cognitive load of interpreting with less effort and greater efficiency.

Conclusion

It is important that VRI be understood in the contexts within which it may be used effectively. CASLI asserts that VRI is not an absolute substitute for onsite interpreting. However, using the guidelines in this paper may make it possible to use VRI successfully. As research in the area continues to be published, it is incumbent on professionals to ensure they are employing knowledge and evidence-based practices to ensure that VRI services are able to closely match interpreting standards set for onsite interpreting and to meet the expectations of the communities we serve.

Acknowledgements

CASLI wishes to acknowledge Dr. Debra Russell and Tracy Hetman for researching and writing this document, with thanks to Aren Burrell, Paul Burrell, Kerry Grandfield, Laura Henry, and Kelly Morse for their additional contributions.

Ratified _____, 2020

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[12] **Pragmatic knowledge** of language in a given context is demonstrated through one's functional and sociolinguistic knowledge. The Canadian Centre for Language Benchmarks (2012) document defines these competences in the following way:

*Functional Knowledge is th*e ability to convey and interpret the communicative intent (or function) behind a sentence, utterance or text. It encompasses macro-functions of language use (e.g. transmission of information, social interaction and getting things done/persuading others, learning and thinking, creation and enjoyment), and micro-functions, or speech acts (e.g. requests, threats, warnings, pleas), and the conventions of use.

Sociolinguistic Knowledge is the ability to produce and understand utterances appropriately. It encompasses rules of politeness; sensitivity to register, dialect or variety; norms of stylistic appropriateness; sensitivity to "naturalness"; knowledge of idioms and figurative language; knowledge of culture, customs and institutions; knowledge of cultural references; and uses of language through interactional skills to establish and maintain social relationships.

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