REMOTE SIMULTANEOUS INTERPRETATION: THE INDONESIAN EXPERIENCE

Inanti Pinintakasih Diran*

Abstract

The unprecedented Covid-19 Pandemic has transformed the world in more ways than anyone can ever imagine. The strict health protocol, social distancing measures, travel restrictions and work from home policies imposed by governments across the globe have transformed the way meetings and conferences are held. Conventional meetings and conferences involving large numbers of people have been prohibited and moved from onsite to online. Virtual meeting platforms is now the new norm. This move also transforms the way interpreters work. Interpreters now work remotely, and in a virtual setting. Indonesia is not immune to this transformation, and Indonesian interpreters must also quickly shift gear. However, the move also brought along a set of problems, including, limited connectivity, insufficient tools and equipment, atypical communication methods, lack of skillsets, confusions, hesitations, and of course, reluctance.

Keywords:
Remote Interpreting, virtual presence, quality of interpretation, acoustic shock, fatigue.

Abstrak

Kehadiran pandemi Covid-19 telah mengubah tatanan kehidupan dunia dengan sedemikian dahsyatnya. Protokol kesehatan yang ketat, ketentuan untuk menjaga jarak, pembatasan perjalanan, dan kebijakan untuk bekerja dari rumah yang diberlakukan oleh seluruh pemerintah di dunia telah mengubah tata cara dalam menggelar pertemuan dan konferensi. Pertemuan dan konferensi yang sebelumnya dilakukan secara langsung dan melibatkan banyak orang telah dilarang dan beralih dari pertemuan langsung tatap muka ke pertemuan virtual secara daring. Platform pertemuan virtual kini telah menjadi norma baru. Langkah ini juga mengubah cara kerja juru bahasa, atau penerjemah lisan. Juru bahasa kini harus bekerja dari jarak jauh, dan dalam lingkup virtual. Indonesia juga terdampak oleh semua perubahan yang terjadi, dan para juru bahasa Indonesia juga harus tanggap dan segera mengubah haluan. Namun, langkah-

* Penerjemah *Pada The International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC) i.diran@aiic.net*

langkah tersebut tidak terlepas dari berbagai masalah, termasuk, terbatasnya konektivitas jaringan internet, alat dan perlengkapan yang kurang memadai, metode komunikasi yang tidak lagi seperti biasa, kurangnya keterampilan, kebingungan, keraguan, dan tentu saja, keengganan.

Kata kunci:
Penjurubahasaan Jarak Jauh, keterhadiran virtual, kualitas penjurubahasaan, kejut akustik, kelelahan.

1. INTRODUCTION

The International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC) defines remote interpreting as information and communications technology (ICT)-enabled interpreting of one or more distant speaker(s)/signer(s) at a given event (AIIC, 2000). The term is also defined as the term used to describe a bi- or multilingual video-conference where interpreters are physically remote from the meeting room and thus do not have a direct view of speakers and delegates (Moser-Mercer, 2011), and a specific method of (conference) interpreting and covers a variety of scenarios of a speaker at a different location from that of the interpreter, enabled by information and communications technology (Ziegler & Gigliobianco, 2018:128).

Although many experimentations on remote interpreting have been conducted since the 1970s by the United Nations in 1976, 1978, 1999 and 2000, as well as the European Union in 1992, the European Commission 1995, 1997, 2000, and the European Parliament in 2001 (Moser-Mercer, 2003:1), remote interpreting itself failed to gain popularity due to a number of factors, including technological limitations and high cost. The results from the UN experiment, however, indicated that during remote interpreting, interpreters felt alienated from the reality they were being asked to interpret. They lost their motivation and felt that their performance was not as good as it normally is. This in turn contributed to the stress, anxiety, and overall loss of motivation (UN, 1999).

Conference interpreters also consider working remotely deprive them of the sense of "presence" and resulting in a feeling of alienation from the actual activities taking place within the event (Ziegler & Gigliobianco, 2018: 120). Being far removed from actual meetings or conferences and only relying on ICT-based technologies hinders the interpreter's ability to provide quality interpretation, as in order to provide clear and coherent interpretation, interpreters must project the cognitive environment(s) of speakers and listeners to form representations of the meanings the s/he believes the speaker intends to communicate (Setton & Dawrant, 2016:11). Remote interpreting was also perceived to be challenging or unacceptable (Braun 2015), resulting in fatigue and stress leading to symptoms such as headaches and concentration problems. In its 2002 Code for the Use of New Technologies in Conference Interpretation, the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC) even went so far as to state putting interpreters in front of monitors and screens to interpret at a distance a meeting attended by participants assembled in one place, is unacceptable.

In the last few years, however, there has been an increase in the demand for remote interpreting due to advances in technology, availability of hardware and software, and growing need for interpreters that may be unavailable in site or difficult and too costly to fly in to the meeting or conference location. However, the unprecedented Covid-19 pandemic and its rapid spread across the globe quickly changed the world and how it functions.

2. The Pandemic and the interpreting platform

In the wake of the Covid-19 crisis, and the inadvertent lockdowns, social distancing, and travel restrictions many conferences were suddenly cancelled or postponed. The pandemic caused temporary chaos, and all of a sudden, conference organizers saw a need for a new medium to ensure that important events and

conferences could be held without the need for people to congregate. The answer, a video conferencing using ICT-based technology. The technology changed the way meetings and conferences are held as it shifts face-to-face interactions into the virtual setting. The ICT-based meeting and video conference technologies that were once set aside and considered to be arduous, complicated, void of any actual human interactions, and unattractive began to reemerge and gained popularity. However, conferences would not run smoothly without the support of interpreters, therefore it was necessary to use communication technologies to gain access to an interpreter in another room, building, town, city or country (Braun, 2015:1).

Interpreters were not immune to the impact of the pandemic. The health protocol that made it compulsory for citizens to work from home, and the shift from onsite to online resulted in great confusions and uncertainties among interpreters the world over. Many were unsure about how interpreting could be performed remotely within a virtual setting.

The emergence of the Cloud-based interpreting platforms that are capable of converging with the ICT-based conference technology paved the way for interpreters to perform their work. However, in order to ensure high quality work, interpreters require a seamless technology that allows interpreters to focus on what they do best, rather than having to add technology management to the coping game that interpreters play (Silva, 2014:18). The shift made it necessary for interpreters to adapt to the new system(s), and at the same time, faced with the daunting task of managing the different technologies involved in the remote interpreting process. This is seen as additional burden by interpreters.

Seeing the rapid changes taking place, and the increasing need for ICT-based video conference technology and Cloud-based interpreting platforms, AIIC's Task Force on Distant Interpreting and

the Technical and Health Committee started working on establishing the standards relating to the working conditions. The move was deemed necessary as in a study commissioned by the AIIC Technical and Health Committee on a number of Cloud-based remote simultaneous interpreting (RSI) systems relating to the audio and combined audio/video signals for simultaneous interpreting based on the requirements set out in ISO standards 20108 on the quality of transmission of sound, and image input and ISO standards 20109 on equipment requirements, all of the interpreting platforms tested did not meet the ISO standards, nor are they ideal for RSI (AIIC, 2019).

AIIC also issued a guideline for interpreters working during the pandemic to assist interpreters in moving from the conventional booth setting into a remote virtual video conference situation, they are the AIIC Best Practices for Interpreters During the Covid-19 Crisis (AIIC, 2020) and the AIIC Interpreter Checklist Performing Remote Interpreting Assignments from Home in extremis during the Covid-19 Pandemic (AIIC, 2020).

3. Interpreters and Remote Stimultaneous Interpreting (RSI)

Many research show that remote simultaneous interpreting (RSI) tends to be more challenging and stressful than the conventional booth setting and may even cause post work exhaustion and extreme fatigue. In a remote setting, interpreters are faced by a myriad of challenges and complexities, such as lack of multi-sensory inputs, lack of a sense of presence, feeling of alienation, as well as the necessity to communicate using multiple devices, which in itself is not always an easy task and usually requiring considerable cognitive resources (Moser-Mercer, 2005:728). Furthermore, interpreters also have to deal with communications via chat, two screens for the software-based console and another for the documents, and sometimes even an extra communication channel with the booth partner (El-Metwally, 2020).

Interpreting remotely from home is also vastly different from working onsite. Interpreters are no longer co-located with their work partners and must rely on other communication devices to ensure smooth switching between interpreters when they take turns. These conditions put another layer of burden on the interpreters, as they must be able to multi-task and divide their attention between their primary monitor that serves as the main console for audio input and audio output, and the secondary device to communicate with their partner.

One issue that is often debated relates to the length of the interpreter mediated assignments. ICT-based video conferences usually run for a maximum of two to three hours, taking into consideration the time differences among the speakers and participants, and as such are generally more intense in nature. This condition along with the higher concentration level required by interpreters in performing their task, loss of non-verbal information, and fatigue consequently lead to greater stress level and a faster decline in the interpreter's performance (Braun, 2015), and it is, therefore, suggested that interpreters do not have to work more than two hours a day (AIIC, 2000) with shorter switching time between interpreters of around 15 to 20 minutes.

Furthermore, interpreters must also ensure that they have a strong internet connection and avoid using Wi-Fi. Interpreters must have a dedicated local area network or LAN by connecting an ethernet cable to the router. This is to ensure a stable connection and prevent any transmission loss during the work. Wi-Fi is often unstable and may cause a temporary loss of transmission, which in turn may result in the disruption of the work in progress, or worse, the interpreter's inability to complete the assignment.

The burden placed on the interpreters during an RSI assignment is immense as they must also manage the technical aspects of the

system and the physical environment of their workplace, such as setting up the quiet working environment that may or may not require sound-proofing, connecting the LAN ethernet cables, establishing linkage to the platform(s) and work partner, and ensuring appropriate sound quality, both input as well as output. In other words, interpreters must also function as a technician, and run tests prior to the actual work (El-Metwally, 2020).

Another factor that interpreters must take into account is the low connectivity on the speakers' end, the speaker's failure to use a microphone while sitting away from the monitor, and sudden image freezes. These situations result in poor audio and video inputs. Such a condition may be temporary, or it could occur throughout the entire speech. As mundane as it may seem, poor audio and video inputs could affect the interpreter's performance and quality as it deprives them of the general verbal context.

Interpreters are also susceptible to sudden loud noises that may occur due to acoustic feedback or microphone dropping. Such a condition may be catastrophic to interpreters, as it may damage their hearing and lead to Acoustic Shock Disorder (AIIC, 2020). The ITU (International Telecommunication Union) and the ETSI (European Telecommunications Standards Institute) define acoustic shock as any temporary or permanent disorder of the ear or auditory nervous system caused by an abrupt and unexpected increase of the acoustic pressure in a telecommunication system (Misener, 2019:). Therefore, in performing RSI assignments, interpreters must make sure that their headsets are equipped with a noise cancellation feature that are in compliance with the ISO technical standards.

If interpreters are unable to adapt to the new situation and failed to manage these additional aspects the quality of the interpreting service may be reduced and may also affect long term health, as it can be a source of additional stress and fatigue (AIIC, 2020).

4. Indonesian Interpreters

It is estimated that there are over 350 Indonesians working as interpreters for a variety of language pairs. Of that number, over 95% of the interpreters work from, and into, foreign languages, and around 5% into the local languages and dialects. A majority of interpreters with an Indonesian-foreign language working language work into English as their B language.

Most Indonesian interpreters are freelancers, meaning they are not attached to any institutions, and some are members of professional organizations:

- The Association of Indonesian Translators (*Himpunan Penerjemah Indonesia* - HPI): 170 members working as interpreters
- The Association of Indonesian Conference Interpreters (AICI): 54 members
- The Association of Indonesian Government Translators *(Ikatan Penerjemah Pemerintah Indonesia* – IPPI): 24 members

Of the overall number 3 interpreters are full members of the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC), 2 interpreters are AIIC pre-candidates, and 19 interpreters are HPI Certified

Most Indonesian interpreters prefer to work using the simultaneous interpreting mode, some are able to work using both the simultaneous interpreting and consecutive interpreting modes, and a handful only do consecutive interpreting. Only around 25% of Indonesian interpreters are trained, the rest are self-taught.

Indonesia also has state interpreters, working under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Cabinet Secretariat. Their number is estimated to be around 40 interpreters, and they work full time as government officers, and are based in Jakarta as well as other

provinces and regions across Indonesia. Almost all state interpreters have received some form of training.

5. Remote Simultaneous Interpreting in Indonesia

Just as other countries, Indonesia is also impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic has made it necessary for the government to impose strict health protocols, including the policy on Large Scale Social Restrictions, the Work from Home policy, and the compulsory use of facemasks. Because of this, many events, meetings, and conferences that were initially scheduled to be held using the conventional methods of onsite gatherings are moved to the virtual settings using ICT-based video conference technologies, and as such, interpreters are required to adapt and revert to this new setting immediately. Indonesian interpreters need to quickly learn about RSI and how to work in a virtual video conference setting.

Indonesian interpreters had to hastily learn about, and get acquainted with, the Cloud-based interpreting platforms that are available and used by their respective clients. They also need procure the required tools and equipment needed to support their work. The process had been challenging, as most had to learn about how the platforms function as they work due to lack of information and knowledgeable resources. But, as time progresses and many interpreters became familiar with the interpreting platforms that are commonly used, some interpreters began to share their knowledge through online training sessions, paid or free of charge. One of the training sessions to introduce and acquaint interpreters to the many different types of interpreting platforms, including the required tools and equipment, was held by the Association of Indonesian Conference Interpreters (AICI), an association made up of Indonesian conference interpreters that was established in 2016.

Today, most Indonesian interpreters have become accustomed to interpreting remotely using the various types of Cloud-based interpreting platforms. However, there are still many issues faced by Indonesian interpreters in performing their work.

The biggest hurdle to RSI in Indonesia is the limited adequate infrastructure. The lack of reliable internet providers that could equip interpreters with the necessary strong, stable, and fast speed internet is one of the on-going problems still faced by Indonesian interpreters. It is not uncommon for interpreters to experience limited or sudden drop in speed, even worse, connection losses during an assignment. One senior freelance interpreter even went so far as to secure three different providers to ensure constant and stable connection.

Another issue relating to infrastructure is electricity. Sudden power cuts or blackouts occur on a regular basis; hence, several interpreters equip themselves with an uninterrupted power supply (UPS) to prevent disruptions and interruption to the connection while working. Several interpreters stated that they had to seek and move to other locations not affected by the power cut just to do their work.

There is also the lack of knowledge on the compulsory equipment to support RSI work. Some interpreters still rely on Wi-Fi instead of using the LAN, stating that it was all that they had to work with. Any form of remote interpreting should be supported by the best possible equipment and connection to achieve an appropriate quality of service (Braun, 2015:12). Using Wi-Fi can result in an unstable internet connection, sudden loss of connection, distorted audio output, as well as distorted video and audio input that may result in delays, video freeze, unsynchronized voice and lip movements, distorted images, incomprehensible message, and difficulties in interpreting what the speakers are saying, thus reducing the quality of the interpretation.

Some interpreters still use cell-phone earbuds, convinced that they are able to hear just as clearly, but neglecting their audio output to the participants. Others say they could not afford the standard noise reduction headset-microphone unit as they are difficult to find or are too costly. Using cell-phone earbuds are not ideal as it puts a strain on your ears and make interpreters more susceptible to acoustic shock and other health-related issues. Furthermore, the microphone attached to the cell-phone earbuds are unstable and could not provide participants with clear audio reception.

Work environment is another problem that Indonesian interpreters have to contend with. The work from home policy also means children have to stay home and follow the distant learning procedure. Some interpreters commented that the biggest difficulty in conducting RSI from home is finding a quiet environment from which they can work without distractions from unnecessary noises, such as children, pets, noisy mobile vendors, and traffic. A few interpreters chose to soundproof their workspace to prevent unwanted noises and improve concentration, one interpreter even set up a dedicated booth in one of the rooms to guarantee sound quality and enhance concentration. As for state interpreters, the biggest issue is finding a quiet location within the premises of their respected offices or workplace that are free of constant disruptions, calls, or visitors.

There are also interpreters who still work alone on assignments, stating that two to three hours of work is not a issue and that they are capable of performing the task alone. State interpreters, on the other hand, are often required to perform their interpreting duties alone due to the unavailability of a work partner. This is not an ideal situation. The cognitive load borne by the interpreter and the extra burden imposed by RSI would require greater effort, thus giving way to exhaustion, fatigue, and loss of concentration, which would ultimately

lead to a decline in performance (Braun, 2015) and may cause other health issues.

The strict social distancing policy enforced by the government makes co-location during an assignment almost impossible. This means interpreters have to rely on additional devices – in addition to the other primary devices required to perform the task – to communicate with their work partners. Most interpreters rely on video call or chat applications. However, video calls are unreliable, as the connection often drops and takes a while to reconnect, and chat applications would require the interpreters to type in a message, which may distract their concentration.

In spite of the issues, RSI in Indonesia is beginning to experience a significant increase. More and more conferences are held using ICT-based virtual conference technologies, and that means more interpreters are moving towards RSI. Along with this new development, more interpreters are now learning about RSI through the training programs offered by official educational institutions and short online training sessions held by government institutions, as well as many interpreting groups.

6. Conclusions

Although remote simultaneous interpreting (RSI) has only been recently introduced in Indonesia, its development and growth had been significant. Indonesian interpreters are adapting well to the change and are able to perform their task satisfactorily despite the many limitations.

However, the interpreters' enthusiasm in joining the RSI bandwagon alone is not enough. Based on the observations that had been made, Indonesian interpreters still need to be made aware of the requirements to ensure quality interpretation and prevent unnecessary health issues in the future, such as:

- Getting used to working with multiple devices and getting acquainted with the different Cloud-based interpreting platforms and their features and functions to prevent unnecessary mistakes or incidences during the interpreting process.
- Avoiding the use of Wi-Fi and switching to LAN-based ethernet connection to ensure a stable connection.
- Having an alternative power source as back-up in the event of a blackout.
- The importance of using noise cancellation headset-microphone unit to prevent acoustic shock. Cell-phone earbuds should only be used to communicate with a work partner.
- Designate a certain area within the home or work premises that could guarantee a quiet environment, free of unnecessary or unwanted noises.
- Refraining from working alone, no matter how short the assignment may be. Working alone not only places greater burden on the cognitive load but may also be detrimental to the interpreter's health as it could lead to extreme exhaustion and fatigue.
- Taking turns or switching with a work partner should be shorter to ensure quality interpretation by reducing the interpreter's stress level.

Given the importance of guaranteeing successful RSI activities, including the health-related issues, further studies need to be done to corroborate the findings from these observations and to continue to investigate the interpreter's performance in RSI assignments.

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