

Evaluating Sign Language Interpreters' Competence in Presidential Debates: A Case Study of the 2024 Indonesian Presidential Debate

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ABSTRACT

The 2024 Indonesian Presidential Debate becomes a crucial means for Indonesian public to obtain political information. Therefore, this broadcast needs to be accessible to all citizens, including deaf audiences. However, presidential candidates often present ideas and arguments that contain technical terms and complex policy concepts. This can make it difficult for the general public to understand, especially deaf audiences, who often face challenges in accessing complex vocabulary compared to hearing audiences. In this context, sign language interpreters play a crucial role in bridging the communication between speakers and deaf audiences. Therefore, this study focuses on evaluating the competency of sign language interpreters involved in the 2024 Indonesian Presidential Debate broadcast to identify various competency aspects that support the implementation of interpreting tasks in the context of political debates. Therefore, this study used a qualitative approach to map the competency of sign language interpreters in the broadcast. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with interpreters, and the results were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify various competency aspects that play a role in the implementation of interpreting tasks in the context of political debates. The findings indicate that the interpreters have three competencies aspect such as linguistics, cultural and academics. Supported by appropriate psychophysiological components, the sign language interpreters were able to

adapt and simplify various terms and concepts used by the presidential candidates, making them more easily understood by deaf audiences.

Keywords: *Deaf Audiences, Sign Language Interpreting, Translation Competence, Presidential Debate*

INTRODUCTION

The Indonesian government's dedication to establishing legally inclusive public spaces was formalised through the enactment of Law Number 8 of 2016 concerning persons with disabilities. This legislative framework provides comprehensive guarantees for the rights of persons with disabilities, encompassing educational accessibility, employment opportunities, and access to public facilities (Mandini, 2020).

This inclusive orientation has subsequently undergone continuous substantive refinement. The government has increasingly acknowledged disparities in information access, particularly recognising that deaf individuals frequently encounter significant barriers to receiving accurate, real-time information through television broadcasting (Fauziyah & Jannah, 2022). To mitigate this gap, inclusive services in visual media have been substantially enhanced, as evidenced by the widespread incorporation of sign language interpretation across news broadcasts and public communication programmes (Yuliastuti, 2017; Rahmawati, 2023).

Within translation studies, the transposition of content from spoken language to sign language is classified as intersemiotic translation, in accordance with Jakobson's (1959) theoretical framework. Conceptually, intersemiotic translation involves the interpretation or transfer of a message from a verbal mode (Source Text/ST) into a non-verbal or non-linguistic sign system (Dusi, 2015; Jia, 2017; Mujiyanto, 2018). In this context, sign language interpreters are tasked with converting dynamic spoken discourse into manual gestures, facial expressions, and other paralinguistic elements that constitute the Target Text (TT).

Despite its critical importance, the intersemiotic translation process is characterised by substantial sociolinguistic complexities and challenges (Suwiryono & Artyana, 2018; Rahyono & Suwiryono, 2018; Nugroho & Lintang Sari, 2022; Semunyu & Rashahu, 2023; Bae, 2023). Empirical investigations have identified four primary dimensions of difficulty: first, the interpreter's limited preparation time inherent to spontaneous interpreting; second, the complex structural variations and distinctive characteristics of sign language; third, the occurrence

of abstract concepts or specialised terminology in the source text that lack established equivalents in sign language lexicons; and fourth, the constrained vocabulary acquisition within the Deaf community itself.

These linguistic barriers are further compounded by the cognitive psycholinguistic conditions prevalent among Deaf individuals. For those with congenital deafness, vocabulary acquisition tends to proceed at a slower rate, with implications extending into adulthood (Antia et al., 2020; Alothman, 2021). Owing to this limited lexical repertoire, sign language interpreters bear a dual cognitive burden in maintaining the fidelity of the source text message whilst ensuring comprehensibility for Deaf audiences.

Additionally, technical constraints within broadcast studio environments contribute to message distortion. The speaker's excessively rapid speech rate, the coexistence of competing Indonesian sign systems (notably the practical conflict between SIBI and BISINDO), and suboptimal television screen visualisation (including framing and image resolution) frequently restrict interpretive flexibility (Bidoli, 2002; Zulphica, 2017).

The cumulative effect of these audience cognitive barriers and technical constraints has the potential to substantially diminish or entirely eliminate the original message of the ST. From a holistic perspective, such reduction in meaning constitutes a critical failure, given that every utterance in public communication conveys a specific ideological and teleological purpose. Consistent with the translation quality parameters established by Nababan, Nuraeni, and Sumardiono (2012), an optimal translation must convey the complete informational content of the source text. Failure to achieve content integrity automatically renders the translation inadequate in quality.

Trimble (2014) highlights the professional challenges encountered by sign language interpreters, particularly those working in rural and geographically isolated areas. Limited access to professional development programs, specialized training, and experienced mentors often constrains the quality and effectiveness of interpreting services in such contexts. To address these challenges, Trimble emphasizes the importance of establishing and maintaining professional networks among interpreters, educational institutions, government agencies, and relevant stakeholders. Such networks facilitate continuous knowledge sharing, professional support, and the exchange of best practices within the interpreting community.

Within their professional practice, sign language interpreters serve not only as linguistic mediators but also as communication facilitators responsible for ensuring accurate, impartial, and confidential message transmission. Interpreters frequently encounter

ethical and role-related dilemmas when adapting messages to enhance audience comprehension while maintaining fidelity to the source message. In specialized settings, particularly legal contexts, disclosure practices are often required. These practices involve providing explicit explanations regarding the interpreter's role, responsibilities, and limitations to all parties prior to the commencement of legal proceedings. Such measures help prevent misunderstandings and establish clear expectations concerning the interpreter's function within the interaction.

Professional sign language interpreting is further guided by a comprehensive code of ethics, which is largely informed by the standards established by the World Association of Sign Language Interpreters (WASLI). These ethical guidelines are widely recognized and implemented internationally, governing aspects such as professional appearance, interpreter neutrality, confidentiality, and message accuracy. A central principle of these guidelines is the obligation to convey information completely and faithfully without altering the intended meaning of the source discourse.

However, achieving a fully complete and unaltered rendition of the source message is often challenging in actual interpreting practice. Napier (2004) argues that omissions constitute an inherent component of interpreters' cognitive decision-making processes during real-time interpretation. Such omissions have been recognized within interpreting studies as legitimate strategic practices, commonly referred to as the condensing strategy (Sunnari or the compression strategy (Chernov, 2004)). In addition to omission, interpreters may also introduce supplementary information into the target text. Livingstone (1995) and Stone (2007) contend that such additions are a natural feature of sign language interpreting, as they often function to clarify, explicate, or make explicit the intended meaning of the source-language speaker, thereby facilitating audience comprehension.

According to Gómez et al. (2007), sign language interpreter competence is a multidimensional construct that involves not only linguistic proficiency but also perceptual-motor, cognitive, and personality-related attributes. The study demonstrates that effective interpreting performance depends on the successful development of both sign language proficiency and interpreting skills. Moreover, perceptual-motor coordination and cognitive abilities were found to be stronger predictors of interpreter success than personality characteristics. Nevertheless, sign language proficiency remains the most critical component, providing the foundation upon which interpreting competence is developed.

In light of this problem above, the present study aims to conduct an in-depth analysis of sign language interpreter competence in translating complex political narratives during the Presidential Candidate Debate of the 2024 General Election. The selection of the presidential debate context is particularly significant, as this forum represents the apex of political discourse, characterised by metaphorical expressions, vision-mission terminology, macroscopic public policy references, and dynamic neologisms.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative method to look into how sign language interpreters work during the YouTube broadcast of the Fifth Indonesian Presidential Candidate Debate for the 2024 General Election. This debate is a type of simultaneous intralingual interpreting. A case study approach was used, focusing on how interpretation happens in this particular communication situation.

The people involved in this study are sign language interpreters who were assigned to the Fifth Indonesian Presidential Candidate Debate. Participants were chosen using purposive sampling, which means they were selected because they were directly involved in the interpreting process being studied.

The informants were two Indonesian sign language interpreters who belong to the Indonesian Sign Language Interpreters Association (INASLI). This shows that they have the proper training and skill to do sign language interpreting. Both interpreters were based in Jakarta, Indonesia.

This study is distinctive in that it examines sign language interpreting within the context of a nationally televised presidential debate, a setting that differs considerably from other interpreting environments such as local electoral forums, governmental events, or press conferences. The debate employed simultaneous interpreting, requiring interpreters to render spoken discourse into sign language in real time while maintaining the accuracy and coherence of the message.

Data were collected through documentation and in-depth interviews. Documentation served as the primary method for examining the context and characteristics of the interpreting event. The researcher systematically observed the Fifth Presidential Candidate Debate, accessed through the official YouTube channel of the Indonesian General Elections Commission (KPU), and recorded relevant data for subsequent analysis. This method facilitated a comprehensive investigation of the sign language interpreting performance within its natural communicative context.

To enhance the credibility and validity of the documentary data, in-depth interviews were conducted with each sign language interpreter. These interviews provided supplementary insights into the interpreters' professional backgrounds, competencies, and interpreting practices. Data analysis involved a comprehensive examination of the debate's video and audio recordings, as well as the transcribed interview data. Accordingly, the study relied exclusively on primary data sources. The dataset comprised two categories of data: linguistic data, consisting of the source and target language utterances, and translation data, encompassing the interpreting strategies and translation techniques employed during the sign language interpreting process.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Sign language interpreters for the 2024 Indonesian presidential debates compiled three competencies to ensure their success. These competencies are divided into three categories: linguistic competency, cultural competency, and academic competency.

Table 1. Indonesian Sign Language Interpreter's Competencies in 2024 Indonesian Candidates Presidential Debate

Sign Language Interpreter Competence				Sign Language Interpreter	
Linguistics	Knowledge	Aptitudes	Cognitive	EW	SS
	High command of Indonesian Language and Bisindo	Efficient input segmentation		Competent	Competent
	Specific Vocabulary	Attentional divisions		Competent	Competent
		Use of Language-pair specific strategies		Very competent	Very Competent
		Predictable properties of language		Very competent	Very competent
		Change translation strategies		Very competent	Very competent
		Verbal fluency		Competent	Very competent
		Processing speed		Very competent	Very competent
Cultural	Knowledge of Indonesian Language	Power of concentration		Very competent	Very competent

	and Bisindo cultures			
	Cultural background	Good long-and short-term working memory	Very competent	Very competent
		Capacity to sign and talk simultaneously	Very competent	Very competent
		Adapt without delay to different speakers/signers, situations and	Personality Competent	Competent
Academic	University degree of equivalent	Pleasant voice and public- speaking skills	Competent	Competent
		Stress resistance and self-control	Competent	Competent
		Professional distance	Competent	Competent

1. Linguistic Competency

In terms of linguistic competence, sign language interpreters assigned to the 2024 presidential debates must master Indonesian as the source language, both the spoken and written language, and the Indonesian Sign Language (BISINDO), used in the debates. BISINDO is preferred in Indonesian presidential debates because it is considered more familiar to the deaf community. SIBI (Sistem Bahasa Isyarat Indonesia) is not used by sign language interpreters, as it is more widely used in academic teaching.

Sign language interpreters must also have a strong grasp of specific vocabulary. The 2024 Indonesian presidential debates will feature five series of debates with different themes, so assigned sign language interpreters must master specific vocabulary relevant to the themes. Sign language interpreters must also be able to predict what each candidate will say.

The ability to receive information and then filter it to the most important information to share with the audience, especially the deaf community. The Indonesian presidential debates are a simultaneous event and are conducted live. So the sign language interpreter has to keep up with the speed of the debate participants' speech, so the sign language interpreter is asked to be able to filter information quickly and then provide gestures for important information.

The source language used in the debate is spoken Indonesian, which has a subject-verb-object (SOP) grammatical structure. However, sign language interpreters must be able to break down this grammatical structure to convey information quickly. Therefore, the

strategy employed by sign language interpreters is to break down incoming information by utilizing visual-spatial structures, such as gestures and mouthing.

The Indonesian presidential debate is conducted in spoken Indonesian, which frequently contains incomplete grammatical structures, spontaneous speech patterns, and discourse features characteristic of oral communication. In this context, sign language interpreters play a critical role in mediating information between speakers and Deaf audiences. Effective interpreting requires interpreters to selectively process and prioritize salient information, distinguishing essential content from less relevant details. As a result, the interpreted message often consists of condensed informational units that preserve the core meaning of the source text while ensuring accessibility, clarity, and efficiency in sign language communication.

Furthermore, sign language interpreters in the presidential debate must be able to divide their attention across multiple tasks, including listening to Indonesian speakers, understanding their spoken meaning, formulating a translation into sign language, and paying attention to their own hand movements for accuracy.

Sign language interpreting also demands specific linguistic and cultural competencies, particularly in selecting appropriate strategies for representing spoken language through fingerspelling, gestural forms, or mouthing. In addition, interpreters are required to recognize and employ loanwords or semantically equivalent expressions that align with the linguistic knowledge and communicative needs of Deaf recipients.

Sign language interpreters participating in presidential debates are required to process information rapidly, enabling them to make immediate linguistic decisions and produce accurate interpretations in real time. Given the simultaneous nature of the interpreting task, the temporal gap between the speakers' utterances and the corresponding sign language output is typically limited to only a few seconds.

2. Cultural Competency

Sign language interpreters in presidential debates must be able to absorb cultural messages, foreign idioms, or local terms from the presidential candidates and then distill their meanings to be translated into Indonesian Sign Language (BISINDO). Therefore, sign language interpreters in these debates must maintain concentration to avoid missing crucial cultural contexts.

The presidential debates are a series of events consisting of several rounds and sessions. Therefore, sign language interpreters

assigned to the debates must master both short-term and long-term memory. This is used to maintain the consistency of sign language movements and preserve the cultural meanings conveyed by the presidential candidates.

The Indonesian presidential debates require flexibility from sign language interpreters, both mentally and personally, because the deaf community in Indonesia has a wide variety of local sign dialects. Therefore, sign language interpreters must be able to find a middle ground to bridge this gap.

During the 2024 Indonesian Presidential Debate, the candidates presented their visions and missions and responded to questions from the panellists. Throughout the debate, cultural elements frequently emerged in the candidates' discourse, reflecting their diverse social and regional backgrounds. In particular, one candidate used Javanese expressions to convey opinions and emphasize specific ideas. In such instances, sign language interpreters drew on their cultural competence alongside their linguistic and interpreting skills. To ensure broader accessibility for Deaf audiences across Indonesia, the interpreters first rendered the Javanese expressions into Indonesian before conveying them in sign language. This strategy facilitated comprehension by minimizing potential cultural and linguistic barriers, enabling Deaf viewers from different regions to access the intended meaning of the candidates' messages more effectively.

3. Academic Competency

Academic competence in sign language interpreting is derived not only from formal educational qualifications but also from the interpreter's level of professionalism. Professional training constitutes a fundamental component in the development of competent sign language interpreters, as it enhances not only technical interpreting skills but also the cognitive, cultural, and ethical competencies required for effective professional practice. Furthermore, such training facilitates closer engagement with the Deaf community, thereby fostering greater awareness of visual communication norms, ethical considerations, and regional variations in sign language use.

In the context of the Indonesian presidential debate, sign language interpreters are also expected to possess strong public communication and interpersonal skills. Their role requires effective collaboration with multiple stakeholders, including event organizers, members of the Deaf community, and audience participants. Collaboration with Deaf individuals is particularly important, as it provides valuable feedback regarding the quality and accessibility of

the interpreted message. Such interactions contribute to the continuous improvement of interpreting performance and help ensure that interpreting services meet the communicative needs of the intended audience.

Sign language interpreters in Indonesia may operate independently or under professional organizations, such as Indonesian Sign Language Interpreters Association (Inasli), *Gerakan untuk Kesejahteraan Tunarungu Indonesia (Gerkatin)*, and *Pusat Bahasa Isyarat Indonesia (Pusbisindo)*. Interpreters affiliated with professional organizations are generally expected to adhere to established codes of conduct and professional standards. Noncompliance with these standards may affect not only the credibility of the individual interpreter but also the reputation and integrity of the organization with which they are associated.

CONCLUSION

The provision of sign language interpreting services during the Indonesian Presidential Candidate Debate represents a significant governmental effort to ensure equitable access to political information and participation for members of the Deaf community. The findings of this study reveal that sign language interpreters engaged in a series of cognitive and linguistic processes throughout the interpreting task, including comprehension and reasoning, lexical retrieval, and message revision. As the debate was conducted in a simultaneous interpreting setting, interpreters were required to process and produce messages in real time, which presented various challenges related to terminology and environmental conditions.

One of the most prominent challenges involved the use of specialized political and technical terminology that may not be readily accessible to Deaf audiences. To overcome this issue, interpreters frequently employed paraphrasing and condensation strategies to preserve the essential meaning of the source message while maintaining synchronization with the speaker and ensuring comprehensibility for the target audience.

As sign language interpreting remains a developing profession in Indonesia, both its professional practice and competency standards continue to evolve. Furthermore, the ongoing discourse regarding the use of *Sistem Isyarat Bahasa Indonesia (SIBI)* and *Bahasa Isyarat Indonesia (BISINDO)* has contributed to the lack of a standardized framework for assessing interpreter competence within the Indonesian context.

Research on sign language interpreting in Indonesia is still relatively limited. Although the present study contributes to the

understanding of the interpreting process and the challenges experienced by interpreters, it does not evaluate the quality or effectiveness of the interpreted output. Therefore, further research is required to investigate how the strategies employed by sign language interpreters influence the quality of interpretation and the extent to which they facilitate effective communication and enhance Deaf individuals' access to political information.

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