US-based legal interpreters and their use of academic research: expectations, practices, and potential for collaboration between academia and the profession

Aída Martínez-Gómez[*], John Jay College of Criminal Justice (CUNY)
Melissa Wallace[**], University of Texas at San Antonio

ABSTRACT

This article examines the use of and opinions about academic research by US-based legal interpreters. It analyses the responses of 233 practising interpreters to an online survey. The survey explored: (1) tools and practices employed for problem solving and skill building; (2) access to and use of academic research; (3) factors affecting use of research; (4) goals and expectations regarding academic research; and (5) the potential role of different stakeholders (interpreters, researchers, educators, and professional associations) in conducting and disseminating research. Results reveal interpreters' limited awareness of the concept of academic research and the current state of the art in legal interpreting. Respondents cite a neglect of professional needs in existing studies and inaccessible formats as major reasons for their lack of engagement. However, they recognize academic research as a valuable tool for enhancing practice and educating legal actors about interpreting. They express interest in furthering their knowledge of interpreting techniques, language and communication issues (particularly legal discourse), the physiological and psychological effects of interpreting, and work-related matters. They suggest closer collaboration between researchers and practitioners in conceptualising and developing empirical studies, and in disseminating findings beyond traditional academic formats.

KEYWORDS

Court interpreting, legal interpreting, academic research, problem solving, survey, research and practice.

1. Introduction

In the field of legal interpreting[1], stakeholders have pointed to a disconnect between theory and practice; that is, between academic research and its applicability to professional needs and concerns. This disconnect has particularly been voiced from the point of view of practitioners (Chesterman & Wagner, 2004; Nicodemus et al., 2022; Shlesinger, 2009), but also from certain academics (Angelelli, 2020; Dam et al., 2019). In order to gain a deeper understanding of legal interpreters' relationship to academic research, in this article we analyse how US-based legal interpreters view academic research, particularly as regards to if and how they use it, and the contributions it may make to their problem solving and skill building efforts. The results of this study may serve as inspiration for future choices of research topics, methods, and publication outlets, or at least as food for thought to rethink current practices and challenge structural and institutional factors that may be contributing to this disconnect. Ultimately, our hope is that practitioners' engagement with research increases and that they may acquire the theoretical and empirical bases they need to make informed decisions in their daily practice.

With these goals in mind, the current project was designed in two parts: a focus group phase and a national survey. Both stages explored the following five issues: (1) difficulties and problems in legal interpreting; (2) approaches to problem solving and

skill building; (3) use of academic research for problem solving and skill building; (4) goals and expectations regarding academic research; and (5) the role of stakeholders in conducting and disseminating research. The focus groups were conducted first, and this input was then used to inform the development of the survey (for details and findings see Wallace & Martínez-Gómez, 2023). This article presents the results of the national survey on legal interpreters' use of scholarly research.

2. The purported divide between research and practice

> 'Translation theory? Spare us…' That's the reaction to be expected from most practising translators (Chesterman & Wagner, 2010, p. 1).

This blunt observation opens Emma Wagner's challenge to Andrew Chesterman regarding the divide between theory and practice in translation studies. From the very first few pages of their engaging co-authored book, *Can theory help translators? A dialogue between the ivory tower and the wordface*, practitioners' misgivings about translation theory and their hopes regarding the contribution it *could* make to professional practice are laid bare. Chesterman argues that the notion of a unidirectional, top-down flow of prescriptive information from theorists to practitioners is considered old-fashioned, prescriptive, and unscientific by most modern translation theorists, whose goal is to "describe, explain and understand" (Chesterman & Wagner, 2010, p. 2). One of his main concerns is that prescriptive statements traditionally were projections and generalisations of beliefs or experiences that ended up being contradictory with each other. However, he later agrees that

> if we [scholars] can formulate such prescriptions as explicit hypotheses and then test them properly, we may get closer to being useful in the way that you envisage… We might even be able to find new hypotheses of cause and effect that had not been thought before (Chesterman & Wagner, 2010, p. 6).

It is at this point, we believe, that theory (or, rather, research) and practice meet and can then satisfy Wagner's plea that "most translators [...] would be happy to have some concrete advice and guidelines, even doctrines, as long as they are practical and realistic" (Chesterman & Wagner, 2010, p. 5). However, as Jääskeläinen et al. (2011) argue, transitioning from descriptivism to being successful in effecting change in professional practice may require some rethinking of our methods and approaches:

> There is plenty of research evidence on which to base our arguments for recognition and adequate remuneration. The problem is that our arguments have not been heard. Also, the links between research and the reality of the translation market… may need critical scrutiny in terms of how we design our concepts, how we design and implement research, how we use research findings to bring about changes as well as how we educate future translators (Jääskeläinen et al., 2011, p. 145).

The early history of interpreting studies reflects a strong connection between practice and research. From the early 1970s until the mid-1980s, practitioners took the lead in interpreting research in response to existing studies they deemed irrelevant or unrepresentative of their experiences. This period saw the emergence of significant ideas about interpreting, such as Seleskovitch's *theorie du sens*, which were widely applied in interpreter training. However, these works were rarely supported by empirical evidence, in part due to the limited scientific research training of these *practisearchers* (see Gile, 1994, for a detailed discussion).

In more recent decades, interpreting studies scholars have tended to have predominantly academic backgrounds, but they often engage in regular or occasional practice within the profession. Hale (2006, p. 206) explains how this is also true of legal interpreting scholars, who "are intimately acquainted with the issues that surround legal interpreting and are driven to investigate aspects that require practical answers to real life problems." The empirical research produced by these scholars has yielded a deeper understanding of legal interpreting practice, including its situated and multifaceted nature, the interpreter's role, and various features of the language of the courtroom, among other aspects. Despite these advancements, this deeper understanding has primarily remained within the research community (Cirillo & Niemants, 2017, p. 2). For example, Angelelli (2008) laments that the little dialogue between practice and theory hinders the field's ability to revisit codes of ethics and standards of practice in alignment with the evidence-based complexities of the interpreter's role revealed by recent research. Overall, as Hale suggests:

> There is a need for productive cross-fertilisation between research, training and the practice of interpreting, where practice generates research questions, research investigates and provides answers to those questions, and training incorporates those answers in their curricula in order to inform practice (Hale, 2007, p. 198).

Other disciplines have long trajectories of creating dialogue between theory and practice. Its most revealing corollary is the emergence of translational research. In the biomedical sciences, where this type of research is most prominent, translational research is seen as a process of sequential applications of knowledge from laboratory conditions to clinical trials with human subjects to "practice settings and communities, where the findings improve health" (Rubio et al., 2010, p. 471). However, these principles are applicable to other disciplines. Translational research, thus, "seeks to 'translate' research in ways that enable that research to be applied. It also 'closes the circle' by allowing practitioners to provide feedback to researchers based on their experience" (Mitchell, 2016, p. 4).

In interpreting studies, this type of dialogue emerges most frequently in pedagogy-related research. Several edited volumes have offered new perspectives on different aspects of interpreter education (curriculum design, pedagogical procedures, teaching materials, learning environments) stemming from evidence-based findings (Cirillo & Niemants, 2017; Davitti & Pasquandrea, 2014; González-Davies & Enríquez-Raído, 2016; Roy, 2006). Others have focused on testing and assessment protocols (Angelelli & Jacobson, 2009) or the use of specific technologies (Orlando, 2016). Pöchhacker (2010, pp. 2–3) states that "the most fundamental use or purpose of research in interpreter education would be a more profound, inter-subjective understanding of […] interpreting as a practice," for instance in terms of market demands, user expectations, and the cognitive, social, and interactional complexities of the task. As Pöchhacker argues further (2010, p. 3), "without extensive evidence of what interpreters in community settings may (need to) do, it would be hard to guide students toward professional performance, relying only on personal anecdotal experience or rigid codes of practice."

The past few decades have provided that "extensive evidence" of what interpreters in community (and legal) settings do that Pöchhacker (2010, p. 3) mentions. While mainly driven by descriptive purposes, as Chesterman indicated above, many studies in legal

interpreting have practical implications for professional practice. This is the case both in pivotal studies, such as those by Berk-Seligson (1990) and Hale (2004), who revealed crucial information about the impact of interpretation on the pragmatics of courtroom discourse, and in more recent research, for example, about the viability and quality of remote interpreting in legal proceedings (Braun, 2013). Nonetheless, these valuable studies do not always succeed in articulating clearly how these findings can be relevant to practitioners, who often lack the time, resources, and training to draw these inferences by themselves (Wallace & Martínez-Gómez, 2023). In fact, the dissemination of these findings in traditional academic outputs in itself makes them largely inaccessible to professional communities (Wallace & Martínez-Gómez, 2023).

Only a few projects have explicitly sought to address the divide between research and practice. Most of them do so by publishing explicit recommendations about interpreting in specific contexts—e.g., how to work with interpreters in gender-based violence situations (Borja Albí & del Pozo Triviño, 2015) or how to train language-proficient incarcerated individuals to act as informal interpreters in prisons (Valero Garcés et al., 2019). Another emerging area of research is exploring the connections with national and international technical standards (ISO, ASTM, etc.), specifically how research can inform standards and how standards are applicable to interpreting practice and research (Mellinger et al., 2023). Finally, only a few scholars have explored professional practices related to the use of research. Nicodemus et al. (2022) do so within a larger study on the reading habits of signed and spoken language interpreters. This study provided the first systematic examination of the degree to which interpreters read research studies and the attitudes they hold about the role of research in their practice, ultimately showing that interpreters engage with research much less frequently than with other types of reading materials. Despite their motivation to gain overall and specific knowledge about interpreting, and occasionally to inform their own teaching, interpreters reported being limited by lack of time to read research, by the limited availability of the studies, and by little awareness of what to read (Nicodemus et al., 2022, pp. 14–15). Conducted at around the same time, the present study seeks to answer similar questions within the specific community of legal interpreters.

3. Method

This study aims to analyse the role that academic research plays in the professional development of practising US-based legal interpreters. Specifically, it examines: (1) the tools and practices interpreters employ for problem solving and skill building; (2) if and how they access and use academic research; (3) the factors affecting their use of academic research; (4) their goals and expectations regarding academic research; and (5) their views on the potential roles of different stakeholders (interpreters, researchers, educators, and professional associations) in conducting and disseminating research. It focuses on US-based legal interpreters, although the method would be easily replicable in other geographical areas and/or interpreting settings.

The study was developed in two phases. The first phase consisted of a series of focus groups that gathered information about the practices and opinions of a small sample of US-based legal interpreters regarding their use of academic research (see Wallace & Martínez-Gómez, 2023). The second phase of the study consisted of the national survey reported on in this article. The findings of the focus groups phase provided

actionable input for the elaboration of the survey constructs and suggested specific language used to craft parts of the survey itself.

The final version of the survey included seven sections: (1) difficulties and problems in legal interpreting; (2) approaches to problem solving and skill building; (3) use of academic research for problem solving and skill building; (4) goals and expectations regarding academic research; (5) the role of stakeholders in creating and disseminating research; (6) overall thoughts and further comments; and (7) demographic information. Sections 1 through 6 included 25 closed-ended questions (multiple-choice, matrix, or Likert-type questions) and three open-ended questions. All these questions gauged attitudes, perceptions, and values (Vogt & Johnson, 2016). Section 7 included eleven demographic multiple-choice questions. The survey was developed and validated particularly for online distribution.

The original survey was piloted with seven legal interpreters selected from our professional networks in Texas and New York and a renowned scholar in the field of legal interpreting. The pilot participants were diverse in terms of educational background, degree of professional experience, and working language combinations. They were asked to provide comments regarding clarity, accuracy, relevance, and any other issues they considered worth discussing, including the time it took them to complete the survey, so that we could include an approximate estimated time in our survey instructions. In order to assure content validity, in line with Mellinger & Hanson (2020), pilot testing and expert review were prioritized, and adjustments were made based on their feedback. Suggested modifications related almost entirely to issues of clarity and types of question used, suggesting sound content and face validity. The data collected during the pilot was not aggregated with the final survey results.

The survey was disseminated as a self-administered online-based questionnaire through the survey platform Qualtrics and was made available between May and June of 2019. Survey respondents were recruited in two main ways: (1) directly through email invitations to members of US federal, state, and local court interpreters' directories, and (2) indirectly through national and regional professional associations, which were asked to circulate the invitation among their memberships, and through social media. The authors also sent invitation emails to their own professional networks. In this way, a combination of convenience sampling and snowball sampling was leveraged. The only inclusion criteria were being a practising legal interpreter and being based in the United States. Participation was open to interpreters in any language combination, regardless of employment and certification status, or degree of professional experience. Participation in the study was completely voluntary, and no compensation was provided. The study received institutional review board (IRB) approval from both authors' respective institutions.

All survey responses were analysed and are reported on in this article. We did not control for respondents based on demographic or professional characteristics nor did we select a subset of answers according to certain respondent variables[2]. We analysed the responses from the 233 individuals who answered at least one question, even though 280 initially completed the informed consent process. Survey responses to close-ended questions were analysed quantitatively through descriptive statistics, whereas responses to open-ended questions were analysed qualitatively following thematic analysis—a bottom-up cluster coding process in which thematic categories

stemmed from the data, that is without any predefined categories prior to starting the analysis (Saldanha & O'Brien, 2013 pp. 189–190).

4. Results

4.1 Respondents

A total of 157 respondents completed the "Demographic information" section of the survey (see more about survey attrition in the Discussion section). These respondents were primarily female (62%) and over 50 years old (61%). They practice in a wide range of states and territories (30 in total) and work in over 25 different language combinations, of which Spanish-English is the most frequent (71%). Respondents were mostly practising interpreters (independent contractors, 59%; staff, 29%) and held an interpreting certification (legal, 83%; other, 12%). Eighty percent (80%) reported being experienced interpreters with more than ten years of practice. In terms of their highest level of education attained, 11% of respondents hold a high school diploma, 31% hold a bachelor's degree, 42% hold a master's degree, and 7% hold a doctoral degree. Approximately 55% of respondents hold degrees in translation and interpreting or languages, literature or linguistics, while 45% hold degrees in other disciplines (e.g., business, education, international studies/relations, and law).

Regarding their education in interpreting and translation at the college or university level, roughly 30% of the respondents reported not having studied these disciplines and 23% reported having only completed isolated coursework. Beyond college and university programmes, however, all respondents reported having completed some training in interpreting and/or translation (e.g., short courses, seminars, or webinars). Approximately 34% had completed more than 300 instructional hours.

4.2 Difficulties and problems in legal interpreting

The introductory question to the survey aimed to identify the areas that respondents find the most challenging in their daily practice as legal interpreters. The question named nine possible difficult or problematic situations for legal interpreters identified during the focus groups stage of the project and included space for "other" responses. Respondents were asked to select up to three answers to ensure that they focused their answers on their main challenges. Table 1 shows which percentage of the 233 respondents who answered this question mentioned each category. The conditions of the source speech (e.g., acoustics, fast speeds, overlapping talk) are reported as the most prevalent concern. Respondents also identified interpersonal matters (such as the attitudes, expectations and demands of legal/court services users and personnel) and linguistic issues (including, but not limited to, specialised terminology) as problematic areas.

Conditions of the source speech (e.g., acoustics, fast speeds, overlapping talk)	65.2%
Attitudes, expectations and demands of non-interpreter participants (e.g., court personnel, parties to the proceedings)	36.5%
Specialised terminology (legal or other)	29.2%
General language issues (e.g., dialects, register, ambiguity). Does NOT include specialised terminology.	25.8%

Employment conditions (e.g., salary, working hours, time to prepare, organisation issues)	25.8%
Lack of resources (e.g., interpreting equipment, electronic devices, computers)	13.7%
Legal knowledge	9.4%
Ethical dilemmas	8.6%
Courtroom protocol and behaviour (e.g., where to stand, who to address)	4.3%
Other	5.2%

Table 1. Difficulties and problems in legal interpreting

Respondents sometimes used the "other" category to point to problems that could be aggregated into existing categories. For example, they wrote of concerns regarding low salaries and practices geared to reducing interpreting costs (e.g., "Courts hiring interpreters who are not registered or approved to lower costs") and, relatedly, by the long hours that they are required to work, often because team interpreting is not utilised or other interpreters are unavailable. Respondents also commented that they face a lack of awareness about their role and ethical boundaries by virtually all parties involved (e.g., "unrealistic expectations with obsolete canons impossible to follow if the interpreter pays [a]ttention to pragmatics and not just semantic and literal aspects of language and communication"). These answers were aggregated to the relevant two existing categories in Table 1 (employment conditions and attitudes, expectations and demands of interpreting users, respectively)[3].

The twelve responses under "other" that could not be thematically coded into the categories listed above point to three new categories of problematic issues:

- Non-linguistic challenges related to interpreting: Five respondents reported being challenged when their interpretations include numbers, cultural equivalents, humour, or when they are asked to sight translate text messages.
- Interpreter colleagues: Five respondents reported challenges related to working with certain colleagues for different reasons, including interpersonal relations (e.g., "uncooperative colleagues"), employment-related issues (e.g., "non-licensed interpreters presenting themselves as licensed"), and performance-based perspectives (e.g., "lack of in-depth training for colleagues").
- Fatigue: Two respondents mentioned fatigue, either as an independent concern or in connection to employment conditions such as long interpreting sessions or the lack of team interpreting.

4.3 Approaches to problem solving and skill building

Table 2 provides response rates for frequency of use of different strategies to solve specific problems or to build general interpreting skills. It also includes mean and standard deviation values that facilitate interpreting the percentage data. Qualtrics assigned the following values to the four possible answers (very often=1, sometimes=2, rarely=3, never=4). Therefore, the lower the value of the mean, the more frequently respondents resort to this strategy.

	Very often	Some-times	Rarely	Never	Not answered	Mean	SD
Consult with colleagues in person (interpreters, mentors, coordinators, and supervisors)	33.91%	40.34%	15.88%	6.44%	3.43%	1.95	0.88
Consult with colleagues remotely (e.g., through texts, WhatsApp groups, professional listservs)	24.89%	31.33%	27.47%	12.88%	3.43%	2.29	0.99
Consult with non-interpreters (e.g., courtroom staff, parties to the proceedings)	8.58%	37.77%	36.91%	13.30%	3.43%	2.57	0.84
Consult dictionaries, glossaries, encyclopaedias (in paper or electronic formats)	66.52%	23.61%	4.29%	2.15%	3.43%	1.40	0.68
Run general internet searches	57.51%	25.32%	10.73%	3.00%	3.43%	1.58	0.81
Consult interpreting reference books (e.g., *Fundamentals of Court Interpretation*)	23.18%	29.18%	32.19%	12.02%	3.43%	2.34	0.98
Consult legal materials and case files	33.48%	35.62%	21.03%	6.44%	3.43%	2.00	0.91
Consult professional publications (newsletters, position papers, blogs, etc. published by professional associations)	15.02%	35.62%	31.76%	14.16%	3.43%	2.47	0.92
Consult academic research studies published in journals or books	10.30%	20.17%	39.91%	26.18%	3.43%	2.85	0.94

| Attend conferences and continuing education courses | 32.62% | 39.91% | 18.45% | 5.58% | 3.43% | 1.97 | 0.87 |
| Use audio-visual materials for language enhancement or interpreting practice | 16.31% | 29.61% | 22.75% | 27.90% | 3.43% | 2.64 | 1.07 |

Table 2. Strategies for problem solving and skill building

Using lexicographical reference materials (*M* = 1.40) and running general Internet searches (*M* = 1.58) were identified as the most common strategies. They are both most closely related to specific problem solving rather than broader skill building and, particularly, to questions of terminology and thematic knowledge, not to interpersonal problems or to problems with the attitudes of administrators and other interpreting users. Closely after these strategies, respondents report relying on colleagues, either on an individual basis (*M* = 1.95) or in group gatherings such as at conferences and continuing education events (*M* = 1.97). It is worth noting that respondents report that establishing these contacts in person is preferred to doing so remotely (*M* = 2.29)[4] and that support from interpreter colleagues seems to be more valuable than that of non-interpreters (e.g., court staff, parties to proceedings) (*M* = 2.57).

Regarding accessing non-lexicographical reference materials, respondents indicate consulting the following sources (in descending order of frequency): legal materials (*M* = 2.00), interpreting reference books (*M* = 2.34), professional publications (*M* = 2.47), and academic research studies (*M* = 2.85). Consulting academic research is, in fact, the least commonly used of all the strategies selected. This reported low frequency of use of academic research will significantly frame the rest of our analysis and may also contribute to explaining the decline in response rates following this question.

4.4   Use of academic research for problem solving and skill building

4.4.1   Sources

The next section of the survey aimed to reveal the habits and experiences of legal interpreters when it comes to consulting academic research. In this section, non-response rates were higher (17.6%). Therefore, reiterating the frequency of use of academic research for these remaining respondents seems valuable to frame the rest of the analysis. Respondents indicated that they read academic studies often (11.6%), sometimes (25.3%), rarely (30%), and never (15.5%)[5].

Regarding the formats in which respondents consume academic research, approximately the same number of respondents reports reading the studies directly and reading summaries made available in publications addressed to the general public (17.6% and 18%, respectively), while also 17.6% respond that they do not consult academic research[6]. Table 3 details the sources leveraged by respondents when consulting academic research, while Table 4 shows how much of the respondents' use of these sources had happened in the past twelve months. Only about 20% of respondents had consulted each of these sources in the previous year.

I read the studies directly	17.6%
I read summaries of the studies in publications addressed to the general public (e.g., press, publications by professional associations,)	18%
I attend conference presentations that summarise the results of empirical studies	14.6%
I learn(ed) about these studies through my interpreter education	12%
Other	2.4%
I do not consult academic research	17.6%
Not answered	17.6%

Table 3: Main sources for consulting academic research

	Yes	No	Not answered
Research studies published in a journal and/or an edited volume or book	22.3%	60.1%	17.6%
Summaries of research studies in a publication for the general public	18.9%	63.5%	17.6%
Conference presentations that summarise the results of empirical studies	20.6%	61.8%	17.6%
Exposure to research studies through interpreter education	23.2%	59.2%	17.6%

Table 4: Sources of research consulted in last twelve months

Respondents were also asked to list the specific publication(s), conference(s) or interpreter education programme(s) that they had consulted or attended in the past twelve months. Among the sources for research studies, respondents included international peer-reviewed journals (*Interpreting, Translation and Interpreting Studies, Perspectives, RID Journal of Interpretation, Target, The Interpreter and Translator Trainer, The Translator*), monographs (Alcaraz Varó & Hughes, 2002; Alcaraz Varó et al., 2001; Angelelli & Jacobson, 2009; Gillies, 2005; Gonzalez et al., 2012; Hale & Napier, 2013), and one mention of an individual article (Braun, 2012). Interestingly, respondents also mentioned reading publications in other disciplines; particularly, science, medicine, psychology, and law. Respondents also report consulting publications by professional organisations, either in general terms (e.g., "(T&I professional) newsletters", "blogs") or explicitly by the name of the organisations and/or their publications. We note, however, that in about half of the cases, they listed these publications under research studies. Among the organisations mentioned are the National Association of Judiciary Interpreters and Translators (including position papers), the American Translators Association (*The ATA Chronicle*), the International Association of Conference Interpreters, AIIC (*Communicate!*, specifically Moser-Mercer's 2003 article), and local and regional organisations. Some of these same associations are also mentioned as the leading organisers of conferences attended by our respondents. Finally, for interpreter education programmes, the respondents primarily identify orientation sessions, staff training, and continuing education seminars offered by the courts (not always related to interpreting, and including other topics such as domestic violence and implicit bias). Respondents also mention a few university programs (University of Louisville, University of Geneva, San Diego State University) and courses by for-profit entities (Southern California School of Interpretation, De La Mora Institute).

4.4.2 Factors conditioning access to research

Tables 5 and 6 summarise the factors that motivate interpreters to consult research studies and those that prevent or reduce their ability or willingness to do so. Regarding the former, 27.5% of respondents report consulting research to improve their interpreting performance, while 12% also find research useful as a means to lend credibility to their professional actions. In fact, a similar response is mentioned under "other" from a slightly different perspective—that is, as a tool to "explain our profession to non-interpreters" and to "educat[e] legal and court personnel." Other reasons to use research include applying findings to interpreter training and obtaining continuing education credits.

I am interested in academic research	6.9%
It helps me enhance my interpreting skills and improve my performance	27.5%
It helps interpreters to improve our working conditions	3.0%
It helps me justify my decisions (e.g., in handling ethical dilemmas, in gaining credibility vis-à-vis other court actors)	12.0%
Other	6.4%
I do not consult academic research	26.6%
Not answered	17.6%

Table 5: Main motivations for consulting research

Regarding the factors that make it difficult for interpreters to use research as a professional resource, 28.8% of respondents mention limited access and pay walls as the main impediment, followed by lack of time (13.7%). Other responses are also reinforced in comments included under "other." Regarding difficulty in finding research, one respondent points out the following:

> It would be difficult to know which study would apply to a specific problem. You would need to read several papers before finding a relevant one. A general interpreter without academic background won't even know where to start looking for the articles.

In terms of lack of relevance, six respondents commented further in the "other" section that research does not seem to address the realities of their professional demands and/or provide specific information applicable to their practice. In fact, as one respondent explains, interpreters need to do a great deal of work to find practical ways to apply research to their practice:

> I use academic research, yet, I find that, at times, it doesn't directly address day-to-day interpreting issues in a direct or forward manner. I do, however, go through reading the research and, after a lengthy, thick reading of the results or observations or the articles, I create a summary of how the research can inform my practice, if applicable.

Under "other", two additional related concerns come up, which also suggest the potential lack of awareness about the current state of the art in interpreting research that has been perceived throughout our study (see Discussion section). Five respondents regret that there is little academic research on interpreting in general or court interpreting in particular. Three respondents question the quality of existing research—two of them make blunt observations about the research they have consulted ("the few I've looked at in my long career were pseudo-science (i.e., crap)"),

and one questioning the professional profile of researchers ("Most academic research is done by people who are not active practitioners in court interpret[ing]"). One final comment points to how the current state of the profession discourages interpreters from putting extra effort into consulting research, particularly when they seek to use it beyond individual skill development: "Interpreters are not taken seriously and there's not a clear forum for addressing issues we face, so even if I am armed with the research it is hard to use it."

I am not interested in academic research	1.7%
I do not know how academic research can help me in my daily practice	4.7%
I do not think that the content of academic research is relevant to my daily practice	11.6%
I do not know how to find academic research	10.7%
I do not have time to read academic research	13.7%
Academic studies are too long	3.9%
Academic studies are often not freely available for the general public (i.e., they are published in platforms with restricted access and/or at a cost)	28.8%
Other	7.3%
Not answered	17.6%

Table 6: Main factors reducing motivation to consult research

4.5   Goals and expectations regarding academic research

This study also investigated respondents' expectations for academic research, including topics to be explored and methods for disseminating research findings. As seen in Table 7, the three most popular topics were interpreting techniques, language and communication (beyond terminology), and the psychological components of interpreting. Under the "other" category, three primary topic categories emerged that cannot be subsumed under any of the provided answers: (1) working conditions (certification, minimum qualifications to access the profession, standardising working conditions, compensation); (2) physiological effects/components of interpreting; and (3) relationships with other court actors (interpreters' low status and power dynamics within the court system and its impacts on performance; educating bench, bar and law enforcement).

Interpreting techniques (memory, note-taking, etc.)	32.2%
Language and communication (does NOT include terminology)	26.2%
Psychological components of interpreting (resilience, confidence, etc.)	23.6%
Specialised settings (depositions, civil, immigration, etc.)	18.9%
Terminology	18.5%
Interpreter education/training	17.2%
Legal procedure and courtroom protocol	13.7%
Technology	13.3%
Ethics	13.3%

Other	10.3%
Certification processes	7.3%
Business management	5.2%
Not answered	27.5%

Table 7: Desired research topics

Regarding preferred channels for receiving research-related content, respondents indicate that they prefer an in-person presentation format in a group setting, either in the form of workshops (37.8%) or professional conferences (31.8%), followed by a similar format online, either through short courses (29.2%) or webinars/videos (24.9%). Respondents' reported interest in these and other formats is summarised in Table 8. Among the "other" responses, three respondents also suggested brief email digests.

Through individual mentoring	5.2%
Through informal social networks	10.3%
Through workshops or short courses (in person)	37.8%
Through short courses (online)	29.2%
At professional conferences	31.8%
By reading the research studies directly	14.2%
By reading summaries of the research studies	18.5%
Through podcasts	11.2%
Through webinars or YouTube videos	24.9%
Other	4.3%
Not answered	27.5%

Table 8: Desired formats to disseminate research findings

In a follow-up open-ended question, 160 respondents shared details (e.g., provider, length, availability) about their preferred formats for the dissemination channels described above. Forty-nine respondents described the value of combining different dissemination formats. For seventy people, interactive gatherings with an opportunity for joint reflection and discussion were reported as being very valuable. Twenty-five respondents suggested short courses, from three hours to two days, to be offered locally (e.g., in local colleges or venues) or online if they are interactive. Thirty-two respondents also suggested one- or two-hour research-based presentations at professional conferences. Regardless of format, respondents commented on the need for learning opportunities to be affordable (six respondents), offer continuing education credits (six respondents), and be held on weekends in order to fit their work schedules (eleven respondents). Sixty-eight respondents commented that accessing research-based content remotely is an attractive option. Twenty-one respondents were specific about their suggestions regarding length: 45–90-minute webinars, 30–45-minute podcasts and ten-minute YouTube videos. For twenty-six, it is crucial that online resources be available on demand (to fit their schedules, to watch/listen to while commuting or between assignments, etc.) and that they remain affordable, if not free. On-demand access and affordability also become central when discussing written materials. Although fewer respondents seem interested in these formats, they recommend two main types of materials: summaries of research findings in professional publications (with reading times under 20 minutes) (ten respondents) and very short descriptions of studies in newsletters, emails, or social media with links to open access full papers or summary videos (16 respondents).

Twenty-eight respondents expressed their preference of having "very knowledgeable, experienced colleagues" providing these learning opportunities. Thirteen respondents reported preferring researchers themselves (ideally, but not necessarily, the authors of the study in question), and two respondents suggested team presentations by a researcher and a practising interpreter. Five respondents emphasised the importance of engaging presenters with excellent public speaking skills, regardless of their background. Finally, sixteen respondents commented that these events should be organised and/or funded by court systems, professional associations, and universities.

4.6   The role of stakeholders in creating and disseminating research

The final question in the survey aimed to elicit respondents' opinions regarding the roles and responsibilities that each stakeholder group should play in creating and disseminating research. Table 9 offers response rates for each answer category and mean and standard deviation values that facilitate interpreting the percentage data (the lower the value of the mean, the more agreement there is among respondents regarding this statement). It is worth noting, however, that 29.6% of the respondents did not answer this question.

There seems to be a general agreement that academic research is crucial for the advancement of the profession (M = 1.72). The most agreed-upon statement reflects an interest in collaboration between academics and interpreters: indeed, most respondents who answered this question (M = 1.42) agree with building mixed-profile research teams comprising academics and practising interpreters. Approximately 50% of respondents who answered this question agree that the role of interpreters in research goes beyond being research subjects (M = 2.41), but also about half of them do not think that interpreters are well equipped to conduct research on their own (M = 2.48). Rather, most respondents to this question agree that practitioners can act as guides for the selection of research topics (M = 1.68), while three quarters share the view that practitioners should be trained to conduct their own research (M = 2.07). In terms of who should curate research to provide interpreters with useful, practical applications for their daily work, respondents placed professional associations at the top of this list (M = 1.69), followed by trainers (M = 1.72) and researchers (M = 1.77), although differences between the three are relatively small.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Not answered	Mean	SD
Academic research is crucial for the advancement of the profession	29.2%	32.6%	7.7%	0.9%	29.6%	1.72	0.70
Academics should be the ones conducting research	12.4%	36.9%	18.5%	2.6%	29.6%	2.16	0.75

Interpreters are well equipped to conduct research on their own	6.0%	29.2%	30.9%	4.3%	29.6%	2.48	0.74
Research teams should be comprised of academics and interpreters	42.9%	25.8%	1.3%	0.4%	29.6%	1.42	0.56
Academics should train and mentor interpreters on research methods, so that interpreters can conduct empirical research studies	17.6%	33.5%	15.9%	3.4%	29.6%	2.07	0.82
Interpreters should guide researchers in the selection of research topics and areas to explore further	27.5%	38.6%	3.4%	0.9%	29.6%	1.68	0.62
Interpreters should be involved in research mainly as subjects to be studied	10.3%	24.9%	31.3%	3.9%	29.6%	2.41	0.8
Researchers should sort through existing research and share its direct applications with interpreters (in workshops or written publications)	24.0%	38.6%	7.3%	0.4%	29.6%	1.77	0.65
Trainers should sort through existing research and share its direct applications with interpreters	24.9%	40.8%	4.3%	0.4%	29.6%	1.72	0.6
Professional associations should sort through existing research and share its direct implications with interpreters	26.6%	39.5%	3.9%	0.4%	29.6%	1.69	0.6

Table 9. Role of stakeholders in creating and disseminating research

4.7   Overall thoughts and further comments

The final section of the survey was used to collect overall thoughts about practitioners' use of and expectations about research. 135 respondents (60%) provided further comments. The following paragraphs summarise the issues that invite further discussion, either because of their direct impact on this project, their ample consensus among respondents, or the new insights they provide.

First, despite the clarifications included explicitly and implicitly throughout the survey, eleven respondents still explicitly expressed confusion about what academic research entails, often equating it with terminological research or preparation for assignments:

> I'm not quite sure I understand or believe that academic research can help a working interpreter. Perhaps I don't understand what is meant by "academic research." As a working legal interpreter, I feel that I am solely responsible for my performance and must take it upon myself to do my own research.

Beyond that limitation, a common view, explicitly discussed by 32 respondents, is that research can be valuable, particularly if it has a direct application to interpreting practice and is presented as such. In the words of one respondent: "Academic research is important, but it is even more important to provide information on how that research applies to everyday interpreting". Often, the direct application that respondents seek relates to an affirmation of their status and the importance of their job, which would also improve certification requirements and overall working conditions (twelve respondents), and of the role research can play in client education (16 respondents). For this purpose, ten respondents insisted that it is crucial that interpreting research be disseminated widely and in an accessible manner among non-interpreter stakeholders. As expressed by one respondent:

> Results of research or studies should be shared with other group[s] in the legal field, not just interpreters. The Bench and Bar are woefully lacking in knowledge about the nature of interpreting, qualifications of interpreters, risks of using unqualified persons as interpreters, challenges faced by interpreters, remedies to those challenges, etc.

However, seven respondents argued instead that regular practice can yield more productive results than engaging with research. Unfortunately, some respondents seem to see these two strategies as mutually exclusive rather than complementary. One stated: "Those of us who already are professional interpreters know that problem solving and skill building comes with continued practice rather than academic research." Another offered the observation that

> Interpreting is largely skills-based, so for my own practice, I find that skills-building activities do the trick, and when faced with sticky situations regarding ethics, protocol, business practices, etc., I simply consult with colleagues. I think academic research has its place in our field, but it's not really a part of my reality as an interpreter.

Eight respondents reflected on the potential value of research as a tool to inform and improve interpreter education and training, such as the one who stated "I'm not so sure about how academic researchers can help practising interpreters. To me, the main way researchers can help is to inform interpreter trainers, so that they in turn can help new interpreters."

Those who agreed on the potential contributions of research to interpreting practice also tended to agree on the importance of teamwork in developing that research (and even suggested meeting frequency, topics to explore, and roles to play in their comments). Seven respondents also suggested including non-interpreters on these teams (court staff, judges, attorneys, advocates, etc.). One respondent felt that "Research is how we move forward as a profession. Interpreters must be involved in the process or researchers are wasting time and resources studying irrelevant issues and topics," while another remarked that "All stakeholders can work together in doing

research. Collaborative efforts (researchers, interpreters, non-interpreters) give a full spectrum of the work that is done, therefore, providing the most complete possible research studies."

5. Discussion

The responses of this survey confirm one of the main findings in our initial focus group study (Wallace & Martínez-Gómez, 2023): legal interpreters perceive a disconnect between academic research and professional practice. This disconnect primarily manifests in the high rates of respondents who report rarely or never engaging with research, a phenomenon also noted by Nicodemus et al. (2022). This lack of engagement appears to be rooted in several factors. Firstly, some interpreters expressed scepticism about the practical applicability of research findings to their daily work. Secondly, it appears that some respondents do not see engagement with research as part of their personal or professional responsibilities. Finally, access barriers, such as paywalls blocking access to scholarly articles, were also cited as deterrents to engagement.

However, this disconnect also seems to stem, at least partially, from a certain degree of confusion about what academic research entails and may offer. Regarding the understanding of research itself, explicit confusion was observed in the final comments (see section 4.7). Another example was found in respondents' responses regarding the sources they consult. It often seemed to be unclear to them where the boundary lay between academic research and the preparation process for an interpreting assignment. Concerning what research can offer, several responses indicated a lack of awareness of the existing literature in various ways. First, some respondents noted the scarcity of studies on legal interpreting, suggesting a gap in their knowledge of available research (see Monteoliva-García, 2018). Second, it was argued that existing research findings were not directly relevant or applicable to professional practice. Such a statement overlooks the contributions of studies on expertise and deliberate practice (Riccardi & Russo, 2013; Tiselius, 2013), on working conditions and certification processes (Hale & Napier, 2016; Hlavac, 2013; Rao, 2021; Tiselius, 2022; Wallace, 2013), and research aimed at producing guidelines for interpreting users (see Monteoliva-García, 2018, p. 51–52)—which are all topics that respondents report high interest in. Finally, some isolated comments questioned the quality of research, including the possible contribution of researchers who are not practitioners. However, this perception may be limited to the experiences of individual respondents rather than indicative of the overall discipline (see section 2).

This lack of awareness is not necessarily practitioners' responsibility. Perhaps it is more a function of research not being available in formats that are readily usable or understandable. Despite current significant emphasis on open science in translation and interpreting studies, and scientific research in general (Olalla-Soler, 2021; Rovira-Esteva et al., 2021), the conventional format of journal articles, even when openly accessible, does not seem to align with practitioners' preferences for dissemination formats.

Three key insights emerge from the survey responses. First, despite their limited engagement, respondents acknowledge the potential value of research, particularly to address structural issues that require broad negotiated solutions involving other legal

actors. Relatedly, they express a desire for more studies on specific topics, such as working conditions, status, certification, and remuneration. Second, they emphasise the importance of accessibility to research and express a preference for formats that suit their needs. Finally, there is a recognized value in fostering collaboration among researchers, practitioners, professional organisations, trainers, and even legal actors.

The results of this survey provide food for thought for legal interpreting researchers, despite the study's limitations in scope and sample size (discussed below). Some of the answers may provide inspiration regarding choice of research topics. More broadly, this presents an opportunity for collaboration, where practitioners contribute insights based on their professional experiences and researchers contribute their epistemological and methodological expertise to select pertinent and feasible questions to explore further. Furthermore, these results point to the value of open science and public-facing scholarship in expanding engagement with research beyond academia. This entails continuing to produce evidence-based practical guidance (see Monteoliva-García, 2018, pp. 51–52) and doing so in a variety of formats, ideally at little to no cost for end users. Improving communication with colleagues in the field may increase awareness of previous and current research findings and the state of the art in the field overall. Finally, some of the survey results also support the efforts behind collaborations between academics and practitioners to produce research that is relevant to the profession. Beyond individual partnerships (e.g., Mellinger et al., 2023), they encourage emerging initiatives like the SSTI Research Collaborative (Wallace, 2024), an international mentorship programme that united practising court interpreters, early career researchers, and seasoned scholars to develop joint research projects that investigated field-related issues, under the auspices of the National Association of Judiciary Interpreters and Translators.

Nonetheless, it would be disingenuous not to recognize that academics/researchers are also constrained by their work conditions. Although it is beyond the scope of this article to address this issue, it is worth noting that any call to action needs to be situated within larger institutional structures. The academic reward system's failure to recognize the value of translational research is well-documented (Alperin et al., 2019; Kools et al., 2023; Niles et al., 2020). As long as the "publish or perish" mentality continues to prevail in academia, any significant investment in any of the ideas proposed above would likely worsen researchers' working conditions. Thus, there would be a need to examine academics' ability to realign their research within existing structures and to explore whether sufficient financial support exists or would need to be secured for developing the theoretical and methodological frameworks required to address practitioners' needs. Additionally, it is also worth remembering that research cannot be expected to be the final answer to professional woes, but rather a tool for evidence-based further action. For example, the availability of evidence-based guidelines does not necessarily translate into best practices (Albl-Mikasa et al., 2011).

Finally, this study presents two main limitations. First, the views expressed by respondents indicate potential trends that would require further investigation with larger and more diverse samples. Sociodemographic factors like language combinations and education levels likely affect respondents' interaction with research. Legal interpreting practices in certain language combinations (Spanish, American Sign Language) have been more frequently researched than others. Level of education can be related to increased potential exposure to research in graduate (and maybe some

undergraduate) programmes, while it is probably rare in other types of shorter skill-based training. Second, there was significant survey attrition. Methodological choices, such as making most questions obligatory and not enabling the option to finish an incomplete survey at a later time, may have increased "respondent fatigue" beyond the expected respondent abandonment (Ben-Nun, 2008, p. 742). If this study is replicated in the future, making more questions optional could increase continued respondent participation. However, we believe that the study topic itself also contributed to survey attrition. The almost 15% decrease in responses following the introduction of the topic of academic research (question 4) suggests that a significant portion of respondents may feel disconnected from and uninterested in research, and thus, unmotivated to continue, despite key information (survey purpose and a definition of research) being included on the initial page. In sum, we acknowledge that factors that affect reliability can be at play, including self-selection and affinity biases, respondent motivation, or data collection across different groups, among others (Mellinger & Hanson, 2020, p. 180).

6. Conclusions

This study aimed to reveal if and how legal interpreters engage with research to develop their skills and solve problems that they may encounter in the practice of their profession. Of all sources at their disposal, academic research is the one that is consulted least often. Despite this, some respondents indicate that they see value in engaging more actively with academic research. Whereas their answers may not be representative of all professionals, they raise points that suggest ways to build bridges across the board. Respondents show genuine interest in furthering their knowledge of particular topics, and many of these topics connect directly with their expectations for how research can make valuable contributions to their professional activity, particularly in terms of advancing their individual skills, strengthening their professional status, and improving their immediate working conditions. Still, they agree that their ability to engage with research is severely limited by the availability of publications (i.e., pay walls) and their own personal constraints (time, competing responsibilities, uncertainty about how to find relevant studies).

Furthermore, respondents shared ideas about how to make research more accessible and easier to balance with their personal and professional responsibilities. They suggest dissemination in group settings (conferences, workshops), either in-person or live online, as well as through on-demand audio-visual materials. They indicate that researchers, senior interpreter colleagues, trainers, and professional associations are well equipped to facilitate access to research for the larger practising community. Finally, they also report an interest in collaborations between researchers and practitioners that materialise in mixed-profile research teams and co-led research dissemination events.

These responses provide significant food for thought for academics and researchers. They point to the fact that research may not be having its desired impact on professional practice and reaching practitioners (and potentially other stakeholders) in a way that moves the profession forward. Many influencing factors are beyond researchers' immediate scope of influence, from work demands on interpreters to the little consideration that public-facing scholarship receives in academic personnel processes. However, some of the findings of this study can provide inspiration for

researchers to continue rethinking research practices in ways that may align more closely with the needs and expectations of the profession and, as respondents suggest, to continue doing so in collaboration with practising colleagues who are also striving for these changes.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available in Zenodo with the identifier https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.11194300 (Martínez-Gómez and Wallace, 2024).

Notes

[1] "Legal interpreting/interpreter" is used here to include interpreting occurring in any legal setting. References to specific subgroups (e.g., court interpreters) are made when relevant.

[2] As explained in the Discussion section, certain characteristics may be over- or underrepresented in this sample.

[3] This same approach has been used throughout the article. In these results, the "other" category exclusively comprises answers that are thematically different from the options provided.

[4] Whereas this was true at the time of the survey (spring/summer 2019), the field's adaptation to remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic may change this trend in the future.

[5] The inconsistency between these answers and those reported on Table 2 can partly be explained by several factors: respondents who stopped participating at this point, possible shifts in answers in different parts of the survey when respondents are "between" answers, and desirability bias, among others.

[6] The slight shift in numbers of respondents who do not consult academic research between the last two questions (15.5% to 17.6%) may be related to potential confusion about what academic research is. Even though we included definitions of academic research early in the questionnaire, our focus group experience indicated that some degree of confusion tends to remain even after definitions and clarifications are provided (see Wallace & Martínez-Gómez, 2023). Consequently, readers are encouraged to interpret the respondents' answers with this caveat in mind.