

In 2005 Ans van Grinsven finalized her research into the work and rest patterns of sign language interpreters in the Netherlands. The results of the findings were published in a final report. The report is written in Dutch. Below is an English summary of the most important findings. The full report can be downloaded from the web site of the Dutch Association of Sign Language Interpreters (NBTG): www.nbtg.nl

Final project PDBO *Ergonomics in work settings*

Time for a clear gesture

An investigation in the work/rest patterns of sign language interpreters

Summary

This experimental investigation aims to answer the question: ‘Does a higher frequency of breaks have a positive influence on fatigue and/or discomfort of the sign language interpreters when the overall balance between work time and rest time remains consistent?’

Following a well-balanced design, twelve subjects interpreted a sound recording according to three work/rest schemes. In the 20 -5 scheme, three sections of 20 minutes were mixed with two breaks of 5 minutes. In the 30 -7.5 scheme, two sections of 30 minutes were mixed with two pauses of 7.5 minutes. In the 60 -15 scheme, interpreters worked for 60 minutes and then took a 15 minutes break. Each scheme took a total of 75 minutes.

Four different measures were carried out: the fatigue that was experienced on a Visual Analogue Scale (VAS), the discomfort that was experienced with a list of ‘locally experienced discomfort’ (LEO), muscle fatigue with the help of electromyography (EMG), and the increase in errors judged on the basis of video fragments.

No differences were found in the development of fatigue ($p=0.682$), and the same holds for the development of locally experienced discomfort ($p=0.708$). The muscle fatigue (a decrease in the Mean Power Frequency, MPF) shows a difference in favour of the 20 -5 scheme in the left m. Trapezius ($p=0.011$). No differences appear in the judgement of errors ($p=0.697$).

The observations and individual differences in the amount of muscle activity during interpreting indicate that there are differences in individual work styles.

In the literature, it is commonly mentioned that a successful prevention of RSI problems is to take breaks while interpreting. It is said that it would be more effective to take frequent short breaks than to take fewer, but longer breaks. At this moment there is no break policy among sign language interpreters at all.

The final advice for sign language interpreters is as follows:

- Ensure that you agree on breaks with your clients.
- It is advisable to take breaks at specific points in time that have been agreed upon, and not guided by the feeling of fatigue of the interpreter (often, the interpreter continues for a longer time than is desirable, and only notices this afterwards).
- It is advisable to agree on taking a break every 20 -30 minutes, taking at least 5 -10 minutes.
- The profession is advised to create a guideline for work/rest times.
- Investigate the possibilities to improve the personal work styles of sign language interpreters.