

The State of the Interpreting Profession in Libya: A Survey-Based Study

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the current status of interpreting in Libya, based on survey responses from fifteen practicing interpreters. It examines formal qualifications, professional accreditation, years of experience, interpreting modes, continuous professional development, institutional affiliation, employment type, performance evaluation, and language combinations. Findings reveal a largely self-taught profession lacking formal recognition: most respondents hold no specialized qualification in interpreting, 80% have no accredited certification, and 60% belong to no professional association. Nonetheless, 40% report over ten years of experience, and 46.7% engage regularly in professional development. Arabic-English remains the dominant combination at 86.7%. The study concludes with recommendations to strengthen accreditation.

واقع مهنة الترجمة الشفوية في ليبيا: دراسة مسحية

حمزة الثلب

الملخص

الكلمات المفتاحية:
الترجمة الفورية، ليبيا، الاحتراف المهني،
الاستبانة، الاعتماد، نموذج الجهد،
العربية-الإنجليزية

تستقصي هذه الدراسة الوضع الراهن لمهنة الترجمة الفورية في ليبيا، استناداً إلى استجابات خمسة عشر مترجماً فورياً ممارساً. وتتناول التحصيل العلمي، والاعتماد المهني، وسنوات الخبرة، وأساليب الترجمة الفورية، والتطوير المهني المستمر، والانتساب المؤسسي، وطبيعة التوظيف، وتقييم الأداء، والتوليفات اللغوية. وتكشف النتائج عن مهنة تعتمد غالباً على التعلم الذاتي وتفتقر إلى الاعتراف الرسمي: إذ لا يحمل معظم المستجيبين مؤهلاً متخصصاً، ولا يحمل 80% منهم شهادة مهنية معتمدة، ويفتقر 60% إلى انتساب لجمعية مهنية. ومع ذلك، يفيد 40% منهم بخبرة تتجاوز عشر سنوات، ويشارك 46.7% بانتظام في التطوير المهني. ويظل التوليف العربي-الإنجليزي الأكثر هيمنة بنسبة 86.7%. وتختتم الدراسة بتوصيات لتعزيز الاعتماد المهني.



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Introduction

Interpreting occupies a pivotal role in facilitating communication across language barriers, particularly in multilingual and politically complex environments such as Libya. As a country that has undergone significant socio-political transitions since 2011, Libya has witnessed a growing demand for language services in diplomatic, humanitarian, legal, and commercial contexts. Yet, in spite of this demand, the interpreting profession in Libya remains largely undocumented and under-researched. Empirical data on who practises interpreting, how they are trained and credentialed, what modes they employ, and how they develop professionally are virtually absent from the scholarly literature.

This knowledge gap is not merely academic. Without reliable data on the profession, it is impossible for policymakers, academic institutions, and professional bodies to design appropriate training programmes, establish quality standards, or advocate effectively for the recognition of interpreters as a distinct and essential professional group. The situation is further complicated by the absence of a national professional association for translators and interpreters in Libya—an institutional void that leaves practitioners without collective representation, ethical guidelines, or accreditation frameworks.

Against this backdrop, the present study aims to provide a foundational empirical portrait of the interpreting profession in Libya. By administering an online survey to practising interpreters, the study documents key professional characteristics and perceptions across ten thematic dimensions. The study is guided by two research questions: (1) What is the current state of the interpreting profession in Libya? and (2) How do interpreters in Libya perceive their professional status and role within the broader language services sector? The findings are intended to serve as a baseline for future research and to inform concrete policy action.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The Professionalisation of Interpreting

The question of whether interpreting constitutes a fully professionalised occupation has been a recurring theme in translation and interpreting studies. Drawing on sociological frameworks developed by scholars such as Larson (1977) and Abbott (1988), researchers have examined interpreting against classical markers of a profession: a specialised body

of knowledge, formal training, credentialing systems, professional associations, and codes of ethics. Pöchhacker (2004) notes that while conference interpreting in particular has made considerable advances toward professionalisation, largely through the influence of the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC), many other interpreting sectors, including community, court, and medical interpreting, remain more loosely institutionalised.

Mikkelsen (2017) observes that the degree of professionalisation varies substantially across different national contexts and settings. In high-income countries, certified court and medical interpreters operate under legally recognised standards; in many developing contexts, interpreters often enter the profession through informal pathways, with little or no formal training. Bancroft (2015) highlights how community interpreters in particular are frequently recruited on the basis of bilingualism alone, without structured preparation for the cognitive, ethical, or interpersonal demands of the role. This pattern of informal entry aligns with findings from Arabic-speaking contexts, where English–Arabic interpreting often occurs within a framework of improvised practice rather than institutionalised professional development (Hasan, 2011; Al-Khanji et al., 2000).

In the North African and Arab world, translation and interpreting studies as an academic discipline have expanded significantly since the 1990s, but the growth of academic programmes has not always been accompanied by commensurate development of professional infrastructure. Studies on translation and interpreting in Libya specifically are sparse; existing scholarship has tended to focus on translation challenges in legal and media contexts (Ethelb, 2019, 2022) rather than on the professional status of practitioners. The present study thus fills a critical empirical gap.

Gile's Effort Model

The theoretical centrepiece of this study's framing of interpreting cognition and quality is Daniel Gile's (1995, 2009) Effort Model, one of the most influential frameworks in interpreting studies. Gile conceptualises simultaneous interpreting as a demanding multi-tasking activity that draws on limited cognitive processing capacity. He identifies four primary efforts: the Listening and Analysis Effort, which includes the perception, parsing, and comprehension of the source language input; the Memory

Effort, which involves temporary retention of information during the lag between source and target production; the Production Effort, which covers the planning and articulation of the target language output; and the Coordination Effort, a metacognitive overlay that manages the allocation of attentional resources across the three primary efforts simultaneously.

A central insight of the Effort Model is that the total processing capacity available to the interpreter is finite, and that performance failures occur when the combined demands of these four efforts exceed that capacity, a phenomenon Gile refers to as a processing capacity deficit. This explains why even highly competent bilinguals may struggle with simultaneous interpreting: the problem is not merely linguistic but fundamentally cognitive. The model has been widely applied to understand interpreting errors and omissions, to design interpreter training curricula, and to analyse the effects of speech rate, information density, and subject-matter complexity on interpreter performance (Pöchhacker, 2016; Gile, 2009).

For the purposes of the present study, the Effort Model provides a productive lens through which to evaluate the implications of Libya's survey findings. Interpreters who lack subject-matter specialisation, who operate without formal training, and who have limited access to professional development opportunities are more likely to encounter processing overload, particularly in demanding domains such as legal or technical interpreting (Maitieg, Alshniet & Ethelb, 2023). The model thus bridges the macro-level professional portrait revealed by the survey data and the micro-level cognitive realities of interpreting performance.

Professional Identity and Self-Perception

A complementary theoretical perspective concerns how interpreters construct and negotiate their professional identity. Researchers such as Rudvin (2007) and Inghilleri (2003) have argued that interpreters occupy an ambiguous position within the communicative event, neither fully neutral conduits nor fully active participants. The concept of role conflict is particularly salient in contexts where professional norms are weakly enforced: practitioners may adopt divergent role conceptions (invisible vs. visible, faithful vs. pragmatic) depending on their training background, client expectations, and institutional setting.

Sela-Sheffy and Shlesinger (2011) draw attention to the sociology of professional recognition, arguing that the status of a profession is negotiated not only through formal certification but also through the collective narratives and self-presentations of its practitioners. Where professional associations are absent or weak, as is currently the case in Libya, this negotiation occurs informally and inconsistently, resulting in fragmented professional identities and variable practice standards. Survey-based methodologies are particularly suited to capturing this kind of landscape, as they allow for systematic comparison of self-reported practices and perceptions across a sample of practitioners (Hale & Napier, 2013).

Taken together, the frameworks of professionalisation theory, Gile's Effort Model, and sociological models of professional identity provide an integrated analytical architecture for interpreting the survey data presented in this study. They allow the findings to be read not merely as descriptive statistics but as indicators of deeper structural conditions and their cognitive and professional consequences.

Methodology

Research Design

The study adopted a quantitative cross-sectional survey design. This approach was selected because it enables the systematic collection of comparable data from a defined population at a single point in time, facilitating the identification of patterns and distributions across multiple professional dimensions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Given the absence of prior empirical studies on the profile of practising interpreters in Libya, a survey design was considered the most appropriate and practically feasible method for generating the kind of foundational baseline data the field requires.

Instrument

Data were collected through a structured online questionnaire hosted via Google Forms and distributed through relevant professional networks and online platforms frequented by language service providers in Libya. The questionnaire comprised ten closed-ended items covering the following thematic areas: formal academic qualifications in interpreting; professional certification status; years of professional experience; modes

of interpreting practised; frequency of professional development engagement; affiliation with professional associations; employment type (freelance vs. institutional); experience of formal performance evaluation; and primary language combination. Response options were provided in multiple-choice format, with options designed to be mutually exclusive and collectively exhaustive within each item.

Participants

A total of 15 interpreters responded to the questionnaire. Participants were individuals who self-identified as active practitioners of interpreting in Libya and were recruited via purposive sampling through professional and academic contacts. While the sample size is modest, it is consistent with the exploratory and foundational character of the study, and with the limited population of formally identifiable interpreters in a country that lacks a professional registry or association. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Ethical principles of informed consent and data confidentiality were observed throughout.

Data Analysis

Responses were analysed descriptively using frequency counts and percentage distributions for each item. The analysis proceeded question by question, following the thematic sequence of the questionnaire. Findings were interpreted in light of the theoretical frameworks outlined in Section 2 and contextualised against the broader literature on interpreting professionalisation. No inferential statistical tests were applied, given the sample size and the exploratory nature of the study.

Data Analysis and Results

This section presents the survey findings across ten thematic dimensions. Each sub-section reports the distribution of responses, accompanied by a summary table and interpretive commentary.

Formal Academic Qualifications in Interpreting

Participants were asked whether they held a formal degree or diploma specifically in interpreting. The results reveal a fragmented qualifications landscape (Table 1).

Response Option	No	%
Yes, from a university or institution in Libya	4	26.7%
Yes, from an international university or institution	2	13.3%
No, but I have a degree in a related field (e.g., languages, linguistics)	6	40.0%
No, I do not have a degree in interpreting or a related field	3	20.0%

Table 1. Formal Degree or Diploma in Interpreting (N = 15)

Only 40% of respondents (n = 6) hold a formal degree in interpreting—26.7% from a Libyan institution and 13.3% from an international one. The largest single group (40%) holds a degree in a related field such as languages or linguistics, while 20% report no relevant academic qualification whatsoever. These findings suggest that the majority of practising interpreters in Libya have entered the profession through lateral academic pathways rather than dedicated interpreting training programmes. This mirrors patterns observed elsewhere in the developing world, where interpreting-specific tertiary programmes are scarce and practitioners frequently migrate from adjacent language disciplines (Bancroft, 2015).

Professional Certification

Participants were asked whether they had completed any professional interpreting certification or qualification test from bodies such as NAATI, ATA, DPSI, or AIIC (Table 2).

Response Option	No	%
Yes, I am certified by an international organisation	0	0%
Yes, I am certified by a national organisation in Libya	3	20.0%

Response Option	No	%
No, I have not pursued any formal certifications	12	80.0%
I am currently preparing for a certification test	0	0%

Table 2. Professional Interpreting Certification (N = 15)

The certification data are among the most striking in the survey. A full 80% of respondents hold no professional certification of any kind, neither national nor international. The 20% who do claim national certification (n = 3) are reportedly certified by a Libyan body, though the precise nature of this certification could not be verified, given the absence of an officially recognised national credentialing system. No participant reported international certification, and none was in the process of pursuing it. This virtually uncertified workforce raises serious concerns about quality assurance and public accountability in interpreting services across Libya.

Years of Professional Experience

Participants were asked to indicate their total years of professional interpreting experience (Table 3).

Response Option	No	%
Less than 1 year	1	6.6%
1–5 years	4	26.7%
6–10 years	4	26.7%
More than 10 years	6	40.0%

Table 3. Total Years of Professional Interpreting Experience (N = 15)

Despite the low rates of formal qualification, the sample is comparatively experienced. Forty percent of respondents report more than ten years of professional experience, and 26.7% fall in the 6–10 year range. Taken together, 66.7% of the sample have at least six years of practice. Only one respondent (6.6%) reported fewer than one year of experience. This

suggests that the interpreting workforce in Libya is not new to the field but has accumulated substantial on-the-job expertise in the absence of formal training structures. Experience-based competence is a recognised alternative pathway in interpreting development, but it is not a substitute for structured training, particularly for cognitively demanding tasks such as simultaneous interpreting (Ericsson, 2000).

Subject-Matter Specialisation

Participants were asked whether they had completed any specialised training or qualification tests related to a particular interpreting domain (Table 4).

Response Option	No	%
Yes, for legal interpreting	1	6.7%
Yes, for medical interpreting	0	0%
Yes, for technical interpreting	2	13.3%
No, my training is general and not subject-specific	12	80.0%

Table 4. Specialised Training or Qualification in Subject-Matter Expertise (N = 15)

A clear majority (80%) of respondents report that their training is general and not subject-specific. Only 13.3% have specialised in technical interpreting and 6.7% in legal interpreting; no one reported specialisation in medical interpreting. This finding is particularly significant in light of the high-stakes communicative contexts that frequently require specialised interpreting in Libya—including oil and gas sector negotiations, legal proceedings, and international humanitarian operations. The absence of domain-specific training heightens the risk of processing capacity deficits as conceptualised in Gile's (2009) Effort Model, where unfamiliar subject matter increases the cognitive load on the Listening and Analysis Effort.

Modes of Interpreting

Participants were asked to indicate the interpreting modes in which they

were most experienced (Table 5).

Response Option	No	%
Consecutive interpreting (speaker pauses for interpretation)	2	13.3%
Simultaneous interpreting (interpreting while the speaker is talking)	1	6.7%
Both consecutive and simultaneous	12	80.0%
Sight translation (translating a written text orally)	0	0%

Table 5. Modes of Interpreting (N = 15)

An overwhelming 80% of respondents report experience in both consecutive and simultaneous interpreting, suggesting a high degree of modal versatility within the workforce. Only 13.3% specialise solely in consecutive interpreting and 6.7% in simultaneous interpreting alone. No respondent identified sight translation as their primary mode. While this apparent versatility is a professional asset, it must be contextualised against the qualifications and certification data above: practitioners claiming proficiency in simultaneous interpreting without formal training risk cognitive overload under real working conditions, given that simultaneous interpreting is widely regarded as the most cognitively demanding of all interpreting modes (Pöchhacker, 2016).

Professional Development Activities

Participants were asked how frequently they engaged in professional development activities such as workshops, seminars, and conferences (Table 6).

Response Option	No	%
Regularly (at least once a year)	7	46.7%
Occasionally (every 2–3 years)	2	13.3%

Response Option	No	%
Rarely (less than once every 3 years)	5	33.3%
Never	1	6.7%

Table 6. Frequency of Professional Development Engagement (N = 15)

The professional development data present a more encouraging picture. Nearly half of respondents (46.7%) engage in professional development activities at least once a year, indicating a degree of commitment to ongoing learning despite the absence of formal CPD requirements. However, 33.3% engage only rarely, and 6.7% report never participating in any such activities. Collectively, 40% engage in professional development less than once every two years, which is insufficient for maintaining high performance in a cognitively demanding and rapidly evolving profession. The lack of mandatory CPD frameworks—again traceable to the absence of a national professional association—means that professional development is entirely voluntary and unevenly distributed.

Affiliation with Professional Associations

Participants were asked whether they held affiliation with any professional interpreting association at the national or international level (Table 7).

Response Option	No	%
Yes, I am a member of a national association in Libya	4	26.7%
Yes, I am a member of an international association (e.g., AIIC, ITI)	0	0%
No, I am not a member of any professional association	9	60.0%
I was a member in the past but am not currently	2	13.3%

Table 7. Affiliation with Professional Interpreting Associations (N = 15)

The association data confirm a picture of professional isolation. Sixty

percent of respondents are unaffiliated with any professional body, and no participant reported membership of an international organisation such as AIIC or ITI. The 26.7% who claim membership of a national association in Libya present an interpretive puzzle: as noted above, no formally constituted national translators or interpreters association currently exists in Libya, which suggests that these respondents may be referring to informal networks, academic associations, or bodies within adjacent fields. A further 13.3% were formerly affiliated but are no longer active members. Professional association membership is recognised as a key marker of professionalisation (Larson, 1977), providing access to ethical frameworks, CPD resources, and collective advocacy. Its near-total absence in this sample points to a structural deficit at the core of the Libyan interpreting landscape.

Employment Type

Participants were asked about their current employment arrangement (Table 8).

Response Option	No	%
I am a freelance interpreter	9	60.0%
I am employed by a private company or organisation	0	0%
I am employed by a governmental body or NGO	1	6.7%
Both freelance and employed	5	33.3%

Table 8. Employment Type (N = 15)

Freelance practice dominates the employment landscape, with 60% of respondents working exclusively as freelancers and a further 33.3% combining freelance and employed work. Only one respondent (6.7%) is employed exclusively by a governmental body or NGO; no participant reported employment by a private company alone. This highly freelance-oriented workforce structure is characteristic of interpreting markets in many countries (Déjean Le Féal, 1997), but it carries particular risks in contexts where professional support structures are weak. Freelancers who

lack association membership, certification, and formal training operate in professional isolation without the institutional scaffolding—contracts, rates schedules, peer review, continuing education—that more organised markets provide.

Formal Performance Evaluation

Participants were asked whether they had ever received formal feedback or evaluation on their interpreting performance (Table 9).

Response Option	No	%
Yes, regularly	4	26.7%
Yes, on occasion	5	33.3%
No, never	2	13.3%
I only receive informal feedback	4	26.7%

Table 9. Formal Performance Feedback or Evaluation (N = 15)

The performance evaluation data reveal a mixed picture. While 26.7% of respondents report receiving formal feedback regularly, a further 33.3% receive it only occasionally, and 26.7% receive only informal feedback. Thirteen percent have never received any form of evaluation. Taken together, only a quarter of the sample (26.7%) benefit from the kind of systematic, regular evaluation that supports professional growth and quality maintenance. Formal evaluation is a cornerstone of quality assurance in interpreting, both in training contexts (Gile, 2009) and in professional practice. Its infrequency in this sample reflects the broader absence of institutional frameworks for accountability in Libyan interpreting.

Primary Language Combination

Finally, participants were asked to identify their primary language combination (Table 10).

Response Option	No	%
Arabic and English	13	86.7%
Arabic and French	2	13.3%
Arabic and another language	0	0%
Other language combination	0	0%

Table 10. Primary Language Combination (N = 15)

Arabic–English is the overwhelmingly dominant language combination, claimed by 86.7% of respondents. Arabic–French accounts for a much smaller proportion (approximately 13.3%), with the remainder citing other combinations. This distribution reflects both the global prominence of English as a language of international communication and the specific geopolitical and economic context of Libya, where interactions with Anglophone organisations, international oil companies, and global institutions constitute the primary driver of demand for interpreting services. The negligible presence of Arabic–French interpreters in the sample may also reflect the more limited scope of Francophone engagement in contemporary Libya relative to neighbouring Maghreb states such as Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia.

Discussion

The survey findings collectively paint a portrait of an interpreting profession in Libya that is experienced but under-institutionalised, versatile but under-trained, and active but professionally isolated. These characteristics are mutually reinforcing: without a professional association to establish credentialing requirements, practitioners are not incentivised to pursue certification; without certification systems, there is no external pressure to engage in structured training; and without training infrastructure, professional identity remains rooted in informally acquired bilingual competence rather than deliberately cultivated interpreting expertise.

The salience of Gile's (2009) Effort Model is evident throughout the findings. The near-total absence of subject-matter specialisation is

particularly concerning when assessed through this lens. In domain-specific contexts, such as oil-sector negotiations, court proceedings, or medical consultations—the cognitive demands on the Listening and Analysis Effort are substantially heightened by unfamiliar terminology and knowledge structures. Interpreters without specialised preparation are more susceptible to processing capacity deficits, with consequent risks of accuracy loss, omission, or miscommunication. The 80% of respondents who reported only general training are, in this respect, cognitively ill-equipped for the most demanding assignments their professional environments are likely to generate.

From the perspective of professionalisation theory (Larson, 1977; Abbott, 1988), the Libyan interpreting sector exhibits several hallmarks of what may be termed a pre-professionalised or nascent-professional field: the presence of a practitioner community, a body of domain-relevant knowledge, and a growing demand for services, but the absence of the key structural markers—mandatory qualifications, certification bodies, professional associations, ethical codes, and systematic quality assurance—that would constitute full professional closure. The 26.7% of respondents who claim national association membership in a context where no formal national association exists may be indicative of aspirational professional identity: practitioners recognising the normative importance of institutional affiliation even in its absence.

The employment landscape, dominated by freelance practice, further compounds the challenge of professionalisation. Freelancers who lack institutional affiliation and formal evaluation mechanisms have fewer opportunities for peer feedback, mentoring, and professional norm transmission. The coexistence of relatively long experience (40% with over ten years of practice) and limited formal training suggests that the Libyan interpreting market has historically rewarded linguistic fluency over technical interpreting competence—a pattern that may be difficult to shift without external regulatory or institutional intervention. These findings resonate with calls elsewhere in the Arab world for coordinated national strategies to develop the translation and interpreting professions through accreditation, curriculum reform, and professional infrastructure (Hasan, 2011; Ethelb, 2022).

The dominance of Arabic–English as the primary language combination, at 86.7%, positions Libya's interpreting needs primarily within an English-

mediated international context. This has implications for both training curricula and language policy: the development of interpreting education in Libya would logically need to prioritise high-quality Arabic–English instruction, while also developing capacity in underrepresented combinations such as Arabic–French, Arabic–Italian, and Arabic–Turkish, all of which are relevant to Libya's geopolitical relationships (Ethelb, 2023).

Conclusion

This study has provided the first systematic empirical profile of the interpreting profession in Libya, drawing on survey data from 15 practising interpreters across ten professional dimensions. The findings reveal a profession characterised by considerable on-the-job experience but significant structural deficits in formal training, professional certification, institutional affiliation, and performance evaluation. These deficits have substantive implications for the quality and consistency of interpreting services in high-stakes contexts across Libya, and they call for urgent policy intervention.

Based on the study's findings, the following recommendations are advanced. First, the establishment of a Libyan National Translators and Interpreters Association is imperative. Such a body would provide a framework for professional registration, ethical standards, and advocacy. Second, Libyan universities—particularly those with language and translation departments—should develop dedicated interpreting training programmes at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels, with particular attention to consecutive and simultaneous interpreting skills, subject-matter specialisation, and professional ethics. Third, a national certification scheme should be established in partnership with the proposed professional association, enabling practitioners to demonstrate and validate their competence through standardised assessment. Fourth, systematic continuing professional development frameworks should be implemented, with professional development participation incentivised or required as a condition of professional registration. Fifth, formal partnerships with international organisations such as AIIC and ITI should be pursued, enabling Libyan interpreters to access global professional networks, standards, and training resources.

The present study is exploratory in nature and is limited by its small sample size and reliance on self-report data. Future research should expand the sample using registry-based or institutional recruitment methods, incorporate qualitative approaches to capture interpreters' lived experiences and role perceptions, and extend the analysis to include client and employer perspectives. A longitudinal dimension would also be valuable for tracking change over time as professional infrastructure in Libya develops. Despite its limitations, this study makes a meaningful contribution to a largely uncharted area of the applied linguistics and translation studies literature, and provides an evidential foundation for the policy actions the Libyan interpreting profession urgently requires.

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