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The best interest of the child in interpreter-mediated interviews Researching children's point of view*

By Amalia Amato & Gabriele Mack (University of Bologna, Italy)

Abstract & Keywords

English:

Children's rights enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) can be substantiated only if children can understand them and can communicate their point of view effectively. Whenever children do not speak the same language of the country where they live, and no action is taken to guarantee their right to communicate in their mother tongue, their rights are at risk. Yet, interpreting is still generally considered as a service activity for adults also in research and interpreter education, and the perception of interpreting by children and adolescents is understudied so far. This paper contributes to filling this gap by giving voice to a group of 18 Italian children and adolescents aged between 6 and 17 who communicated via an interpreter for the first time and expressed their preferences and concerns. The aim was to collect information about their perception of some aspects of an interpreter-mediated interview, in particular how they felt during the interview, what was their perception of role and rapport building and their preferred seating arrangements. We hope with this study to inspire further research in this area and also, possibly, specialised training for interpreters who work with children.

Keywords: interpreting for children, children's rights, language rights, children's view, interview

1. Children's language rights in the EU and in Italy

Giving a definition of the terms 'fragility' and 'vulnerability' is difficult, as convincingly argued by Virág (2015: 77ff). Any person, regardless of age, can be frail for a variety of reasons and in many ways, and vulnerability is often a temporary condition induced by transient circumstances. Boys and girls under 18 are considered vulnerable *per se* by national and international legal provisions which recognise their need for special care, especially (but not only) if they are on the move and/or separated from their families.

The fundamental legal provisions concerning children are enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (1989), with 196 State Parties as of October 2015,[1] and 181 ratifications in 2019.[2] A number of articles define children's language and communication rights, namely articles 12 and 13. Article 12 guarantees freedom of expression in matters affecting the child and gives due weight to the child's views, and it establishes the obligation to hear the child in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting her/him. Article 13 grants every child the right to "express his or her views, obtain information, and make ideas or information known, regardless of frontiers". Though it may sound obvious, all these rights can be substantiated only if children can understand them and can communicate their point of view effectively. But linguistic rights are not explicitly granted by international law, although there are initiatives like the Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights signed in 1996 in Barcelona (UNESCO 1996a and 1996b).

In Italy, the child's right to be heard when involved in legal proceedings was introduced by decree law no. 154 in 2013, which added article 336-bis to the Civil Code. For unaccompanied children, a major step forward was Act no. 47 of 7 April 2017 ('Provisions on protective measures for unaccompanied foreign minors') stating that no later than 30 days after having been reported to a public authority, unaccompanied children have the right to be heard by qualified staff who collect their story and all the necessary information to grant them protection, with the help of a cultural mediator if necessary.

1.2 Public service interpreting in Italy

In Italy, the shortage of qualified and trained interpreters in the languages of recent migratory flows in legal and other crucial settings - such as health care, education and psychiatry - raises concerns also in terms of children's rights. So far there is no register or accreditation system for public service interpreters, and according to a comparative research in six European countries, their professional status in Italy is very low and their work is poorly paid, which inevitably affects the quality of their interpreting services negatively (Casadei and Franceschetti 2009: 18). Qualified conference or liaison interpreters only rarely accept assignments in public service settings where interpreting is generally performed by linguistic and/or cultural mediators. The first official definition of mediator dates back to 1997, and in the following years local authorities issued multiple and varied job descriptions.[3] Later on, regional and local authorities defined a common job description similar to that of a caseworker who also provides language assistance and interpreting, but it is still ambiguous and comprises so many tasks and roles that it seems impossible they can be all performed by the same person (see Conferenza Regioni e Province Autonome 2009: 8-9). Moreover, so far there are no common standards for training and qualifications of cultural mediators (Amato and Garwood 2011). The lack of standards and accreditation of mediators is even more worrying if we consider that in Italy among users of language services there are particularly vulnerable groups like migrant (and often unaccompanied) children.

In legal contexts (see ImPLI 2012; Falbo 2013) interpreting is mainly carried out by a) in-house police interpreters who work as full time staff for the Ministry of Interior; b) former migrants who may or may not be trained as cultural and language mediators and cover languages of lesser diffusion as well as vehicular languages but have no training in interpreting techniques such as consecutive with notes or whispering; and c) bilinguals acting as *ad hoc* interpreters without any training or experience neither in legal matters nor in interpreting. Also in health care, interpreting is rarely provided by trained interpreters, and schools have very small budgets to ensure communication with newly arrived foreign pupils.

2. Research on interpreting for children and adolescents: a literature review

The lack of explicit language rights for children and adolescents is reflected also in the limited number of interpreting studies in this area. This sharply contrasts with the abundant research on interpreting activities performed by children known as language brokering, which raises completely different problems and will not be dealt with in this paper. The following sections give a brief overview of the most salient empirical studies on interpreting for children and present facts and findings that will be referred to when discussing the results of our study. We shall first discuss the few publications about interpreting for very young children (section 2.1), then interpreting for migrant children and for minors in legal settings (section 2.2), and finally interpreting in paediatric and mental health care settings (section 2.3).

2.1 Interpreting for very young children

A Norwegian research project in public service interpreting for children conducted by researchers from Oslo University College includes a study on very young children's behaviour in interpreter-mediated conversation (Hitching and Nilsen 2010) to which Nilsen (2013) added some more interviews. Analyses of video-recorded interactions led the authors to conclude that also very young children aged 3 or 4 are able to understand the peculiarity of interpreter-mediated communication and adapt to it,

provided they understand and accept the basic rules of turn-taking in consecutive interpreting. Kanstad (2015) confirmed this finding in a study involving a 3-year-old boy who was assisted by an interpreter during his first weeks in a Norwegian kindergarten. Basically the same observation was made by Solem (2014) with *chuchotage* (whispering) and simultaneous interpreting for 5 children aged between 3 and 7 years. Kanstad's research was part of a multidisciplinary project aimed at both raising awareness and expertise about communication with children via an interpreter and showing how children's rights stated in the UN CRC can be granted (Kanstad and Gran 2016: 21).[4] In this study the need for and the right to interpreting for children were discussed from the perspective of three groups: hearing impaired children with sign language as their first language,[5] Sami speaking children and newly arrived migrant children. Interpreting was recognised as an important tool to safeguard these children's rights of expression and participation, and prevent marginalization (Kanstad and Gran 2016: 99). The authors conclude that in increasingly intercultural societies communication via an interpreter should be part of the training of kindergarten teachers, and foreign children should have the right to an interpreter, especially in their early days at kindergarten (ibid.: 95).

2.2 Interpreting for migrant children and in legal settings

The Oslo University College project mentioned above also involved the Norwegian school administration and the Directorates of Immigration and of Integration and Diversity, taking into account the viewpoints of users, recruiters, and staff working with interpreters as well as interpreters themselves about interacting with minors in public service encounters. One of their conclusions was that interpreting between adults and children does not differ significantly from interpreting between adults. However, while interpreters do not need a different toolbox to interpret for children, this must be extra-large (Hitching and Nilsen 2010: 37). Moreover, interpreters' personal qualities and flexibility seem particularly relevant since some individuals are better at interacting with children than others (Nilsen 2015). Besides strongly recommending to resort only to trained and experienced interpreters, the Norwegian researchers also suggested that in the public sector interpreter-mediated communication should become a component of professional training in intercultural communication for all staff working with children.

Another research project about interpreting in childcare institutions and care centres for unaccompanied asylum seeking minors, which was carried out on behalf of the Norwegian Directorate of Children, Youth and Family, collected quantitative and qualitative data in different ways including also interviews with employees, managers, professionals and young migrants, but unfortunately the young respondents' answers were not discussed separately (Berg et al. 2018). The use of untrained bilinguals and breach of confidentiality proved to heavily undermine users' trust in interpreting. Telephone interpreting seems rather common in Norway, mainly for logistic and cost reasons (Berg et al. 2018: ix), but very little is known about the preferences of young people in this respect. Only Øien, who interviewed 30 asylum seekers aged 15-18, incidentally mentions that some minors seem to prefer the greater distance and impersonality of telephone interpreting when they have to discuss sensitive issues (Øien 2010: 31).

A series of studies based on conversation analysis was carried out in Sweden on a corpus of 26 interviews with Russian children, with the aim "to explore how the participation of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children is interactively constructed in interpreter-mediated asylum hearings" (Keselman 2009: 34-35). The analyses show "how interpreters can challenge asylum-seeking children's participant statuses" (Keselman, Cederborg and Linell 2010: 83) and how the development of trust/mistrust can be traced in the interviews (Linell and Keselman 2010). Another conclusion was that "interpreters are powerful participants who can profoundly influence the fact-finding aspects of asylum investigations" (Keselman et al. 2010: 333), and that unprofessional interpreting increases power asymmetry. For this reason,

both caseworkers and interpreters need special training in the characteristics of desirable interview techniques. They also need to ensure that their collaboration is based on a joint understanding of how messages should be translated and of the ways in which meaning can be changed when the form and structure of utterances are changed. (Keselman et al. 2008: 113)

Probably the most investigated area of interpreting for minors is the legal one, but once again, although mentioned in a great deal of studies, the specific needs of children rarely become a major focus (e.g. Berg and Tronstad 2015; Kjelaas and Eide 2015; Kjelaas 2016). The voices of children directly involved in interpreter-mediated encounters have been listened to in even less cases, but not about their experience with interpreting as such (e.g. Kanstad and Gran 2016; Berg et al. 2018).[6] In their discussion about interviewing practice, Böser and La Rooy (2018) highlight the need to modify protocols like **NICHD** if encounters are interpreter-mediated.

2.3 Interpreting in paediatric and mental health care settings

Paediatric care is another setting where interpreting for children occurs frequently. Also the children's right to health is enshrined in the CRC, but again it can be granted only through language and communication, while in many countries physicians and therapists complain about scarce resources even for the most urgent needs (Landesärztekammer BW 2015; Mannhart and Freisleder 2017). Loosely defined qualification standards for interpreters and the ensuing variability in the quality of their services is frequently mentioned in this context, together with budget constraints.

With the exception of some studies on unaccompanied minors, the bulk of research in interpreting for children in medical settings deals with interactions between adults and neither distinguishes between interpreting for adults and for children nor enquires about the latter's perceptions and preferences. Some publications reflect personal experience (e.g. Phoenix Children's Hospital 2008), while others stem from the analysis of recordings of interpreter-mediated encounters (Wadensjö 1998, 180-186 and 192-195; Leanza and Rocque 2015; Amato and Mangoni 2020) or are part of more extensive projects, like the Swedish survey on communication over language barriers in paediatric cancer care involving doctors, nurses and interpreters (see Granhagen Jungner et al. 2019).

An area of particular interest that was investigated rather early is interpreting in child mental health (Raval 1996; Loshak 2003; Leanza et al. 2015) and psychiatric care for traumatised children after humanitarian emergencies. Accounts in literature are partly based on professional experience (Rousseau, Measham and Moro 2011; Pfister and Kötter 2016) and partly on research. For children with preliminary diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in the direct aftermath of mass disasters, interpreter-assisted psychotherapy using various forms of narrative proved to be extremely efficient (Catani et al. 2009), and the same was found for traumatised refugee children (Ruf et al. 2010). Interpreting for children who are victims of sexual abuse puts additional strain on all participants, and research suggests to offer interpreters extensive preliminary briefing and access to supervision (Fontes 2008: 161-162; Fontes and Tishelman 2016; Powell et al. 2017). For psychotherapeutic settings, Costa (2018) voices concerns about language choice, since using one's mother tongue rather than an acquired language or a *lingua franca* has deep emotional implications.

Also in the health care context, researchers insist that

interpreters who work with children and families need additional training in order to be able to address the child in an age-appropriate way and accurately convey information about the language and nonverbal communication skills of the child. Mental health professionals also need specific training in how to work with interpreters. (Leanza et al. 2014: 94)

Studies also confirm previous

results on diversity of interpreters' roles, the crucial places of trust and time, need for recognition of interpreters' and the complexity of practitioners' work. (...) The key challenge seems to be the collaborative building of an integrative framework. (...) Interpreters need to acculturate, like immigrants to the society, to the clinical milieu in order to offer

professional services. (...) Interpreters' integration within clinical teams is a metaphor for integration within society: differences and *métissages* may exist within a framework (laws) respected by all. (Leanza et al. 2015: 371-372)

Generally speaking, children tend to learn a new language rather quickly and often act as interpreters themselves for their family or peers, as the vast literature on child language brokering confirms, but the very first 'official' contacts with an alien society and a still unknown language are absolutely crucial. Talking about his first weeks in a reception centre near Turin, a 13 year old Moroccan boy said: "I didn't understand Italian, there is a mediator but she comes only every now and then. One day I wanted to jump out of the window, which was very high, but I was afraid. That was a prison, not a reception centre. There are windows with bars..." (Rozzi 2013: 63). Kanstad and Gran rightly voice the need for

reflections on a more basic level about what view we really have of a child as a person and as an own individual and subject. (...) There may be a danger that the children who share our language are seen as subjects and individuals while those who are more distant due to language and communication difficulties are at risk of being seen as objects. (Kanstad and Gran 2016: 93)

3. Our study on children's and adolescents' perception of interpreting: design and methodology

As the overview on literature in section 2 shows, a number of aspects concerning interpreting for children have been addressed by research so far, but the perception and preferences of children and adolescents who need the assistance of interpreters have been largely neglected. For this reason we undertook a study aimed at collecting first-hand information from children and adolescents about their feelings and preferences during the first interpreter-mediated interview in their life. The study is part of the Co-Minor-In/Quest project series[7] launched in 2012, to our knowledge the first transnational project about interpreting for children in legal settings. It first collected quantitative data via an on-line questionnaire aimed at professionals who work with children. The respondents were 848 from 16 countries (see Balogh and Salaets 2015: 183ff for the results). The follow-up project, Co-Minor-In/Quest II, collected qualitative data about interpreter-mediated interviews involving children via a focus group with professionals and semi-structured interviews with minors in order to design appropriate tools for joint training and awareness-raising among professionals which incorporated also children's feelings and opinions about interpreting.

In this paper we report about 18 Italian children and adolescent's perception of roles and rapport building during an interpreter-mediated interview as well as some of their preferences, namely seating arrangement and age and gender of the interpreter. In the next paragraph we will describe the study design and highlight some limitations.

3.1 Study design

One part of Co-Minor-In/Quest II research project involved conducting semi-structured interviews (SSI) with children of three different age groups (6-9; 10-13; 14-17) after their first direct experience of an interpreter-mediated conversation.

Before providing a detailed description of the SSI and discussing the results, it is important to point out the child-centred approach of our study design. Instead of observing children as objects and then writing about them, in this work we consider children the main players and source of information and knowledge, to factor in when adults work with them. In other words, our approach was that of research with and for children rather than on children (Fargas-Malet et al. 2010; O'Reilly, Ronzoni and Dogra 2013; Clark et al. 2013).

3.1.1 Preliminary work

Before starting to organise the interviews, we obtained the approval of the research project from Bologna University Bioethical Committee and attended a webinar by Terre des Hommes about how to interview children with full respect of their rights and preferences.[8] The SSI script was prepared by the team of project partners which included six interpreting researchers, a representative of Terre des Hommes, an expert of child rights, a child lawyer, a lawyer, a criminologist and a development psychologist. The questions addressed reflect the main issues identified during the previous Co-Minor research project. The SSI script was drafted in English with the wording tailored to the different age groups mainly by the criminologist and the psychologist and then translated into Italian. It included 29 questions grouped into 7 thematic chapters covering 1) personal feelings; 2) understanding of roles and relations between the persons involved; 3) skills of the people involved; 4) space and time arrangements; 5) the technical implementation of the interview; 6) trust and rapport and 7) general feedback. Most questions were open, and during the SSI only in a few occasions small adjustments or additions were made to respond to the children's moves, though with hindsight, it could also have been advisable to stick less to the SSI script with the younger children up to the age of 8 (see Einarsdottir 2007). Two questions were added during the interviews with the teenagers prompted by one of their answers (see section 3.3.2).

Children and teenagers were enrolled through the local education authority in Forlì applying the following inclusion criteria: Italian mother tongue, no prior experience with interpreters, and no knowledge of German - the language chosen for the interpreter-mediated interview because it is rarely taught in schools in Italy and it is the mother tongue of one of the researchers. Children with a migration background were excluded considering the probability of previous experience with interpreting and in order to avoid possible reactivation of negative recollections connected with migration. For logistic reasons only one pilot interview was conducted with a 6-year-old child (the age group we expected to be potentially the most difficult to handle). We realise that a couple of questions are not completely open, namely the ones asking children to mention what they liked or disliked about the interviewer and the interpreter. Although the wording was meant to help younger children understand these questions, with hindsight the result is a couple of questions that can be perceived as leading.

3.2 The interviews

The interviews were conducted in late winter 2017 and involved 18 participants (10 girls and 8 boys) during four afternoons. Eight children were aged 6-9, four 10-13 and six were teenagers aged 14-17. After watching a short video used as a prompt, each participant took part in two different conversations: during the first one (the interpreter-mediated interview) they talked about the video to an unknown foreigner with the help of an interpreter; during the second conversation (the SSI) they talked with one of the researchers about their experience of communication through an interpreter. The first conversation had no script and unfolded spontaneously according to the participants' answers and reactions since the person acting as interviewer (who actually had not seen the video) had the goal to obtain information about the events featured in the video but no other instructions, while the second conversation, in Italian, was based on the SSI script.

A room in our university building was used for the interviews while parents who accompanied children waited in another room, and a third one was used as a waiting room for the interviewer and the interpreter only, when they were idle. Recordings were made with a camcorder and two audio recorders.

In the interpreted interviews different seating arrangements were used for different age groups[9] (see section 3.3.3):

6-9 years of age: three chairs in a circle, no table (as there was no furniture with suitable sizes available);

10-13 and 14-17 years of age: five chairs at a rectangular table, with the child/teenager invited to choose where to sit and where to place the interviewer and the interpreter.

The role of interviewer was played in turn by a high school language teacher, a university professor and a junior lecturer, all German nationals, who had been briefed about the project and how to conduct an interview in a child-friendly way. All interviews were interpreted by the same young male Italian interpreter with German as a B language who had about four years of experience as a free-lance conference and public service interpreter. He had been instructed to use both consecutive with and without notes and *chuchotage* during the interviews. As suggested by the psychologist and the child rights expert in the

research team, the children were put in the position of a witness, but the interviews took place in a neutral environment and were conducted in a very informal style.

Upon arrival, all children and adolescents were given the same preliminary information about the interview and namely: a) that they were going to watch a video; b) that a person who had not seen it would talk to them to get as much information as possible about what happened in the video; c) that since that person did not speak Italian, there would be an interpreter who would help them communicate; d) that they could simply say what they remembered about the video and there were no right or wrong answers; and e) that they could put an end to the conversation at any time.

After each child had watched on his/her own a 2'30" long video featuring a pickpocketing scene without any violence and with no talk,[10] the interpreter and interviewer came into the room and were introduced by their name and role. During the interpreter-mediated interviews, the researchers were sitting at the back of the room but did not participate or interact in any way. After the interpreted interview and a short pause, the children were asked if they agreed to have another conversation with one of the researchers (the SSI) about the interpreted interview that had just taken place. Again they were reassured that there were no right or wrong answers and that they could decide not to answer at all. The second researcher took notes and operated the recorders. Table 1 illustrates the 18 interviewees' age and gender and the length of the SSI.

Interviewee's age	Interviewee's gender	Length of the SSI
6	m	9' 05"
6	m	10' 20"
6	m	10' 31"
7	m	10' 51"
7	f	10' 59"
8	f	9' 06"
8	f	15' 14"
9	f	8' 59"
11	f	14' 50"
12	m	12' 23"
12	f	12' 32"
12	f	13' 33"
16	m	16' 04"
16	f	17' 52"
16	m	18' 54"
16	m	20' 53"
17	f	10' 51"
17	f	16' 41"

Table 1: Participants' data and length of the 18 interviews

All SSI were fully transcribed, quotations were translated from Italian for the purpose of this paper. Thematic content analysis was performed coding the answers according to a first set of categories which was cross-checked and adjusted in a second round of analysis.

3.3 Main findings and discussion of semi-structured interviews

In this section we will discuss children's views on four topics: personal feelings, role of the interpreter and rapport among participants, and choice of seating arrangement. We are neither trying to generalise these findings, nor claiming that they are specific to children only, since there is no adult control group with whom the same study was conducted to compare results. We simply listened to the voice of children and collected their opinions and feelings about their first experience of an interpreter-mediated interaction.

3.3.1 Feelings about the interpreter-mediated interactions

The first question asked to children and teenagers was «How did you feel?» during the interpreter-mediated conversation they had just had. About half of them, especially younger children, admitted they felt nervous before the conversation because of the unknown situation and/or because they could not communicate directly with the interviewer, and indeed, they were faced with a new experience involving persons they had never met before and communication through an interpreter. This feeling is related to trust and rapport which will be discussed in section 3.3.2.

To the following question - «What did you like in particular during the conversation?» - two of the younger children said they liked being asked questions about the video, one said he liked being carefully listened to by two adults, and one liked listening to an unknown language. These answers suggest that the initial feeling of anxiety and unease faded away as the interaction unfolded and was over at the end of it. Most of the older children liked the idea of being able to talk to a person they did not know in a foreign language.

The next two questions concerned positive feelings. To the first one - «What did you like most of the interviewer?» - most younger children could not answer, but one said «I understood the interviewer sometimes: when she pronounced my name and said 'OK'». This confirms, from the perception and viewpoint of a child, the importance of social support during interviews as highlighted in a study which examined the level of support interviewers provided to children:

Support was identified when interviewers personally addressed the child by his/her name (e.g., 'now Daniel tell me everything that happened from the beginning to the end' or 'Tell me more about this person, Sharon') and when neutral reinforcements, unrelated to the content of the child's response, were included. (Hershkowitz 2011: 113)

Three children between 10 and 13 pointed out that they appreciated the interviewer showing interest for them: "She was curious"; "She watched my gestures and looked at me while I was speaking"; "She looked really interested", again a form or non-verbal reinforcement. All teenagers focused on emotional and non-verbal aspects concerning the interviewer: attitude, spontaneity, naturalness, keeping eye contact, patience, willingness to listen were mentioned as the most positive aspects. This confirms, if need be, the well-known importance of non-verbal and kinetic aspects in communication (Poyatos 1987), and strongly suggests that interviewers should take them into careful consideration also when working with children who speak another language.

The second question was: «What did you like most of the interpreter?». Some of the younger children underlined that the interpreter was there to help them, and one of them said: "I liked best that he said what I said". The older children and teenagers mainly appreciated the skills of the interpreter and rated him as very proficient. One of them said: "He tried not to translate literally but to communicate, to make his talk sound Italian and not a translation". Since all teenagers came from a humanities high school, this observation could reflect his personal experience with translations from Latin and ancient Greek in class. In general, being asked questions made children connect this experience to school; in particular younger children made several references to their teachers and schoolmates during the SSI.

Negative feelings were investigated with the question: «Was there something you disliked in the interview?». The only aspect, mentioned by almost all interviewees, was overlapping talk produced by the interpreter when whispering. The reason for this dislike was mainly that it was perceived as overlapping talk and interrupting, and interrupting a person is culturally related to rudeness in Italy. Some also found it confusing since it prevents from listening everything that is being said, and two children aged 10 to 13 doubted that the interpreter could hear what they were saying since he was translating while they were speaking. These perceptions are in line with the literature on child interviews in legal settings which states that children should not be interrupted in order not to interfere with memory and with the flow of their narrative. This is an aspect which deserves further investigation. Three of the younger children could not answer the question because they said they did not notice that there had been a change of interpreting mode, but the video recordings clearly show them reacting to *chuchotage* by raising their tone of voice and/or by springing up from their chair in an attempt to draw the interviewer's and interpreter's attention to what *they* were saying.

3.3.2 Perception of roles and rapport building

The following section of the SSI concerned the role of the interpreter and the rapport between participants. To understand whom interviewees identified as their main conversation partner, they were asked whom they had told the story of the video to. Half of the children up to 13 identified the interpreter as their primary communication partner, and half identified the interviewer. All teenagers said they told the story to the interpreter but two of them specified that the interviewer put the questions and therefore what they said was addressed to the interviewer. Several comments made by children and teenagers show that this choice is also associated with eye contact. One child said: "I looked mainly at the interviewer; the interpreter looked at me and at the interviewer".

The question «Who listened most carefully to you?» received different answers in all age groups, with interesting explanations. One young child said the interpreter listened with more attention because "He was the one who understood me". One older child thought the interpreter listened more carefully because "He had to listen *and* translate", and one teenager said the interpreter listened more carefully since he had to translate, while two others thought the interviewer listened more carefully because she showed attention, gave non-verbal feedback and tried to follow what was being said even if she did not understand Italian. Again, support and reinforcement by gestures or other non-verbal cues such as nodding and eye contact did not go unnoticed and were mentioned as significant by the older respondents.

Two additional questions asked only to teenagers concerned the interpreter's gender and age. They came up in the interview with the first teenager, who stated that the relatively small age difference with the interpreter had made him feel more at ease, because he felt he would not be judged negatively if he made a "language mistake". Another interviewee said he perceived a younger interpreter as less intimidating while two boys said that, generally speaking, they would prefer an older interpreter because s/he would be more reliable and reassuring. The interpreter's gender, instead, was not considered significant by any of the teenagers.

3.3.3 Seating arrangements

When preparing the SSI, the group of researchers thought that investigating about the seating arrangement would be relevant with regard to access to non-verbal communication (see section 3.3.1). The above mentioned comments on this aspect seem to confirm that indeed the possibility to see all participants is perceived as important also by children. For the younger ones, three chairs had been arranged in a small triangle with no table (Fig. 2). When asked where the interpreter was sitting during the interview and where they would like him to sit next time, all children remembered the seating arrangement and said they had liked it and would not change it because it allowed them to watch both the interpreter and the interviewer.

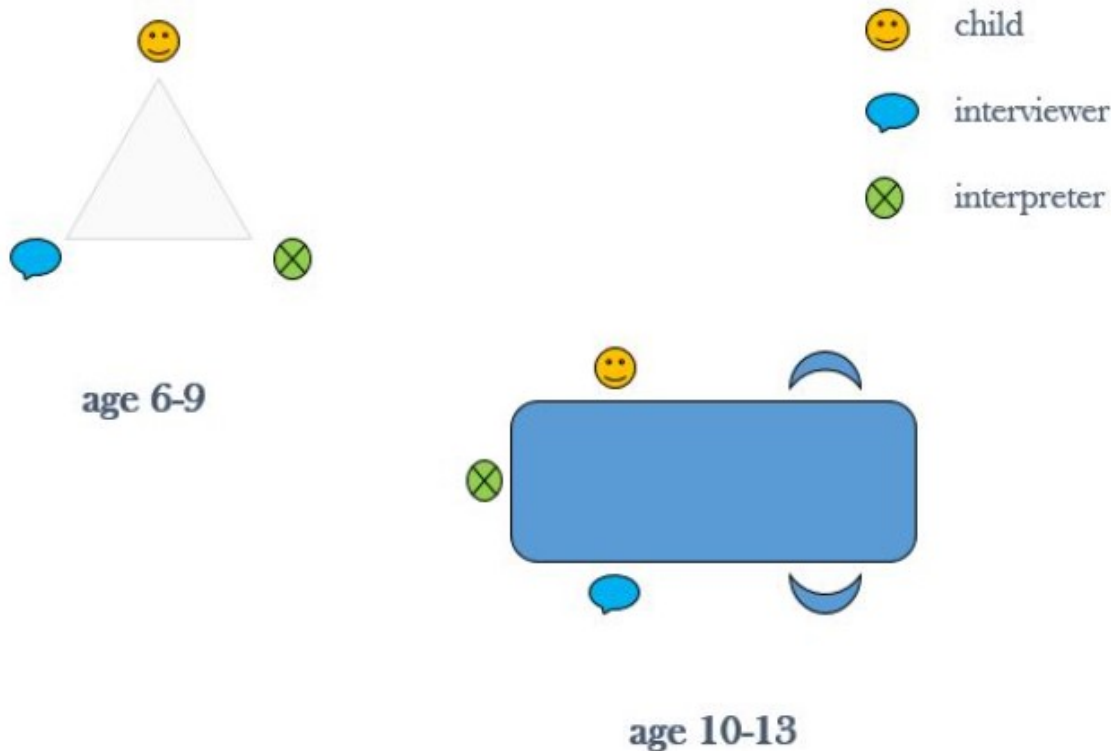


Figure 2: Seating arrangement for children aged 6-9 and 10-13.

The groups aged 10 to 17 were offered to choose where to sit and where to place the interviewer and the interpreter at a rectangular table with five chairs, and during the SSI they were asked to explain the reasons for their choice. The four children aged 10 to 13 chose to sit in front of the interviewer at one of the long sides of the table and placed the interpreter at the short side (Fig. 2). Two of them specified that they asked the interpreter to sit in that place because: “It is not nice to say it, but the interpreter is a go-between”; “The interpreter is a sort of conduit”; the other two stressed they wanted eye contact with the interviewer and therefore had placed her in front of them, and one of them added that she chose that seating arrangement because she wanted to be sure she could hear the interpreter clearly. It could also be that the usual positions of teacher and pupils in a classroom influenced this choice.

The six teenagers instead made five different choices (Fig. 3) and gave different reasons. Arrangement (a) was chosen by one boy and one girl who decided to sit at the short side of the table and asked the interviewer and the interpreter to sit one in front of the other at the long sides of the table. One of them explained that with this arrangement she could turn her head towards the interviewer or the interpreter when she was talking or listening to one or the other; the second teenager said he wanted to have direct eye contact with both conversation partners. Another boy chose to sit at the short side of the table with the interviewer and the interpreter one in front of the other at the long sides of the table, but the interpreter further away (arrangement b). He explained that for him the primary communication axis was with the interviewer, for whom he showed a strong liking from the very beginning. Arrangement (c) was chosen by another boy who sat at the long side of the table opposite to the interviewer and with the interpreter at his side. He explained that this way he could have eye contact with the interviewer while talking to “his” interpreter. Arrangements (d) and (e) were chosen by two girls who sat at the long side of the table opposite the interviewer, but one of them placed the interpreter at the short side of the table and the other one beside the interviewer, again in order to have direct eye contact with the interviewer.

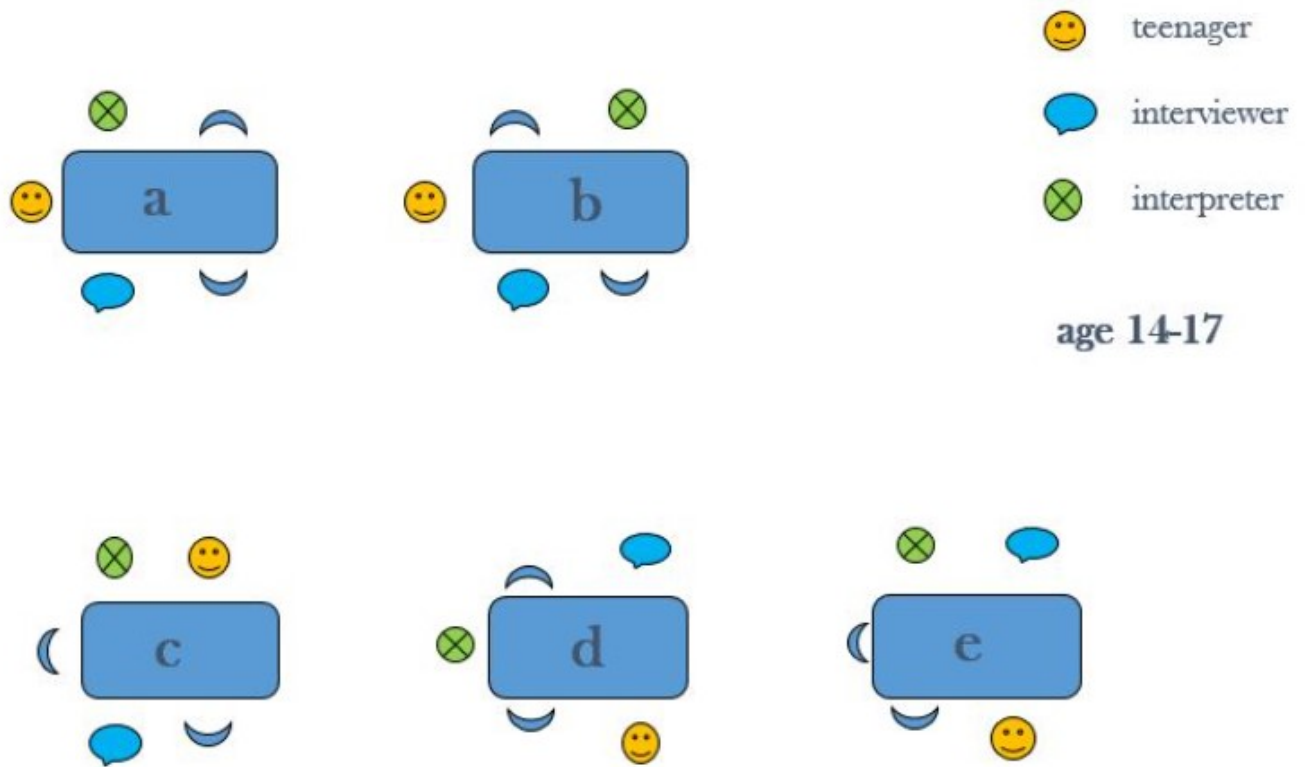


Figure 3: Seating arrangements chosen by teenagers (14-17).

Most teenagers said they would keep the same arrangement they had chosen if they had a chance to choose again. Trying to find a common denominator in the choices of the teenager group would be an unsuccessful exercise. The information they gave us is that they have individual preferences for seating arrangements and are able to motivate them and that offering them a choice can make them feel more at ease and possibly more empowered during an interview. This is particularly important when compared to a police psychologist's opinion we collected during a focus group, who insisted that the interpreter should be sitting behind the child or teenager because the interviewer should be the sole conversation partner during the interview. Also Wiener and Rivera (2004) claim that in psychotherapeutic sessions, whenever possible, the interpreter should sit to the side and a little behind the patient in order not to interfere in the patient-provider relationship. The children and teenagers in our study wanted to establish eye contact with both the interviewer and the interpreter. Being briefed and placed in a friendly environment, children and teenagers who took part in this research project showed to be well aware of communication axes and components - both verbal and non-verbal - and of who was their main conversation partner (section 3.3.2), and they attached great attention and importance to non-verbal cues. Their choice and reasons for seating arrangements confirm that seeing both the interpreter and the interviewer made them feel at ease and 'in control' of the interaction. This idea is also supported by their negative perception of whispering: they generally expressed a dislike for it because they felt that not everything that was said could be heard (section 3.3.1).

4. The perspective of children and adolescents - caveats and conclusions

The aim of this study was to investigate children feelings and impressions after their first experience of communication through an interpreter during an interview. Obviously no general conclusions can be drawn from a small sample like this, nor do we know if our findings apply specifically to children since there was no adult control group. Some aspects, however, converge with what has been reported by other researchers. Results with our age group 6-9 confirmed for example that young children are able to communicate successfully via an interpreter (see Kanstad 2015, Nilsen 2013, Solem 2014). Hitching's and Nilsen's (2010) conclusion that interpreters' personal qualities and flexibility are particularly relevant was indirectly confirmed by the large number of comments, made by all age groups, on the interpreter's collaborative attitude and ability to inspire trust. As far as their preferred interpreting mode was concerned, our respondents showed a dislike for whispering as observed also by Solem (2014).

Experiencing a new way of communication raised mixed emotions as the interaction unfolded, from (initial) nervousness to (final) satisfaction about the unprecedented opportunity of speaking to a foreigner.

During the interpreted interview, almost all respondents noticed and reacted to verbal and non-verbal signs of attention and interest by the interviewer and rated them positively together with her careful listening without interruptions. Non-verbal communication and kinetic aspects were fully captured also by younger children, which suggests that either letting the child choose the seating arrangement or carefully planning it is probably the best way to allow the child to have eye contact with all participants.

Before drawing conclusions one point should be stressed once again: although children were placed in the shoes of witnesses, the interviews did not take place in a legal setting nor in a police station, and there were neither a psychologist nor a social worker present, but the interviews were conducted in an institutional context, with unknown adults, in an unfamiliar environment, and the timeframe was rather limited - all aspects that must be taken into account (Spyrou 2011). It is not possible to say if in a different setting our participants would have reacted differently, nor is it possible to say to what extent they tried to please the researchers with their answers or to give a positive image of themselves by avoiding expressions of negative feelings which could be associated to rudeness or impoliteness. Nonetheless this research provides some useful hints to the preferences of our participants which can be summarised as follows:

- being informed (i.e. know what to expect from the interview(er) and who does what and why);
- feeling at ease and not being put under pressure;
- being listened to carefully;
- not being interrupted;
- having eye contact with both interviewer and interpreter;

being allowed to choose the seating arrangement.

Although this list may not be exhaustive and is open to additions, it reflects what the children and teenagers in our study showed to appreciate and hopefully gives some hints about what children want and feel when having to communicate through an interpreter. We hope with this study to inspire further research in this area and also, possibly, specialised training for interpreters who work or intend to work with children, in particular (but not only) in legal settings in the best interest of the child, because children can only enjoy their rights if they can understand them and can give their point of view.

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Notes

* Paragraphs 1 to 3.1.1 by G. Mack and paragraphs from 3.2 to 3.3.3 by A. Amato. Paragraph 4 is a piece of joint work.

[1] <https://www.unicef.org/child-rights-convention/frequently-asked-questions>.

[2] <https://www.kidsrightsindex.org/Methodology/FAQs>.

[3] for an updated overview, see http://www.integrazionemigranti.gov.it/Attualita/Approfondimenti/approfondimento/Pagine/Mediazione/QUADRO_REGIONALE.aspx

[4] All translations from Norwegian are ours.

[5] For reason of space this paper will not touch upon the vast literature on educational interpreting for deaf children. For a general overview, see Winston (2015), Seiberlich (2013).

[6] For a more comprehensive bibliographic overview on previous research in this area, see Van Schoor 2013, complemented by a National Children's Advocacy Center bibliography (2016), Amato and Mack 2017, and Balogh and Salaets 2015 which is the main output of the CO-Minor project described in section 3.

[7] See <https://site.unibo.it/interpretazione-minori-cominor1/en> and <https://site.unibo.it/interpretazione-minori-cominor2/en>.

[8] see Terre des Hommes' Child Safeguarding Policy, URL: <https://www.terredeshommes.org/child-safeguarding-policy/>.

[9] The age groups reflect the Italian school system articulated in 5 years of primary school, 3 years of junior high school and 5 years of senior high school (in our case in Humanities)

[10] The video was produced during a previous EU funded research project "ImPLI" by Charles University in Prague, Faculty of Philosophy and Art, Institute of Translation Studies. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yo9yUeEhH7Y&list=PLx15JSWFqoqCm5ycG6CKzxAQHE-Yfrglj&index=2&t=0s> (last accessed on 14.10.2021)

[11] Unless otherwise stated, all links were last accessed on 20.02.2020.

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