

China's Emergency Language Services During the COVID-19 Pandemic^{*} —Status Quo, Problems, and Solutions

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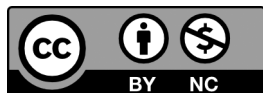
Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic has struck the whole world and posed great challenges to emergency language services (ELS), a much-neglected field of study in China. During the fight against the pandemic, ELS responded quickly to the unprecedented demands by mobilizing all possible means to facilitate doctor-patient communication and cater to other people's various needs. This study, by relying on desktop research and semi-structured interviews with people directly or indirectly involved in ELS, tries to explore the status quo, features, and inadequacies of China's ELS during the COVID-19 pandemic and offers suggestions for its future development. ELS has tremendously facilitated China's fight against the pandemic, especially in emergency translation, emergency interpreting, emergency publicity, emergency consultation, and emergency online education, during which technologies have played a vital role. However, due to the unexpected and serious nature of the disaster and China's lack of related experience in ELS, there is still much room for improvement in laws and regulations, national leadership, talent banks, talent training, ELS for special groups of people, and technological support. This study is hoped to share the merits and demerits of China's ELS experience with the international community, boost its further development, and enrich its research content.

Key words: COVID-19; Emergency language services (ELS); Emergency translation; Emergency interpreting; Language rescue; China

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^{*}文系广东省“英语笔译系列课程教学团队”建设项目(粤教高函[2020]19号)、广东外语外贸大学“英语笔译创新教学团队”项目的阶段性成果、国家社会科学基金后期资助项目“口译教学语料库深度加工机制研究”(编号20FYYB017)的阶段性成果。

1. Introduction

The term emergency language services (hereinafter referred to as ELS, which is used as a singular noun for convenience's sake) was barely used in the international community before the COVID-19 pandemic. Instead, when translation and/or interpreting in emergencies, crises, or disasters is needed, various terms have been used, such as community interpreting in the process of disaster management (Bulut and Kurultay, 2001), interpreter service in emergency medicine (Chan et al., 2010), language translation during disasters (O'Brien et al., 2018), translation in a disaster (Cadwell, 2020), crisis translation (Federici and AL Sharou, 2018; Marlowe, 2020; O'Brien and Federici, 2020; O'Mathúna and Hunt, 2020; Y. Zheng, 2020; Dreisbach and Mendoza-Dreisbach, 2021), and translation in times of crisis (Rojo López and Naranjo, 2021). It should be made clear that emergency, disaster, crisis, and catastrophe have been used somewhat interchangeably, though they are not the same. In this paper, ELS is defined as language services to overcome communicative barriers caused by language(s) in emergency contexts, such as natural disasters, wars, medical reliefs, accidents, and conflicts, which are emergent and concerned with the security of the nation and ordinary people's life and properties to remove misunderstanding, enhance communications and resolve crises (Teng, 2018).

ELS is an umbrella term encompassing emergency interlingual, intralingual, and inter-semiotic translation and interpreting, and various other emergency services involving languages and dialects, such as emergency language software R&D, disaster information dissemination, anti-disaster language resources management, emergency language standard development, emergency language training, language therapy, and rehabilitation, language consultation, and crisis intervention (L.F. Wang et al., 2020).

In fighting the COVID-19 pandemic, China's ELS has played a key role in facilitating doctor-patient communication, satisfying the language services needs of people in all kinds of social contexts, publicizing

epidemic knowledge, and enhancing epidemic awareness of the public.

When the pandemic first broke out, Hubei Province in Central China was the most seriously struck, with 68,135 cumulative confirmed cases by July 10, 2020.^[1] According to the National Health Commission of the People's Republic of China, a total of over 42,600 doctors and nurses, and large numbers of other volunteers from around the country flocked to Hubei to join in the rescue.^[2] As China is a country with 56 ethnic groups and numerous local dialects and ethnic-minority languages, people from nearby villages, not to mention from farther away places, may not be able to understand each other if they do not speak Putonghua, the official language. In Hubei alone, there are four major dialects with a lot of subdialects, whose pronunciations and tones are quite different from Putonghua. When the rescue workers and volunteers first arrived in Hubei, they were confronted with great difficulties in understanding the dialects spoken by the locals, which hindered timely diagnosis and treatment. At the same time, foreign nationals in China also desperately needed information and assistance related to the pandemic. Although there was no official number of medium- and long-term foreign residents in China, it was estimated to be over one million in 2020.^[3] For example, in Shanghai, the largest city in China, over 280,000 foreign nationals took up long-term jobs there, accounting for over 23% of the national total.^[4] In addition, assistance materials from around the world were also in great need of translation before they could be delivered to the right places for the right purposes. Moreover, the hard-of-hearing and the mute people, who were estimated to

[1] https://m.thepaper.cn/baijiahao_8230550.

[2] <http://finance.china.com.cn/news/20200331/5236900.shtml>.

[3] <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1660411896633066139&wfr=spider&for=pc>.

[4] <https://video.sina.cn/finance/2021-04-22/detail-ikmxzfmk8288039.d.html?ampage2>.

be over 20.57 million nationwide, also expected ELS. To overcome the language barriers and to cater to the needs of different groups, various ELS measures were taken by related authorities, academic associations, and civic organizations.

Accordingly, China's ELS during the COVID-19 pandemic has drawn the attention of the media and the academic circle alike, producing a lot of news reports and academic papers. With so many reports and research papers on ELS available, it is both necessary and essential, to sum up, China's practices and experiences. In addition, existing problems have not been discussed in depth. Therefore, the current study tries to investigate China's ELS during the pandemic from four aspects, namely, the status quo, features, problems, and suggestions in the hope of promoting its better development in the future and enhancing communication and cooperation between China and the international community in ELS.

2. Literature review of ELS in China

Though ELS has long existed in disastrous contexts, studies on it are a recent phenomenon in China. By using different combinations of words for topic search, including “应急” (emergency), “紧急” (urgent), “灾害” (disaster), “地震” (earthquake); “突发事件” (emergencies), “语言” (language), “服务” (service), “应急服务” (emergency service), “语言服务” (language service), “应急翻译” (emergency translation/interpreting), the authors retrieved 88 journal papers from China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) (March 27, 2022) after eliminating repetitions and irrelevant literature. The year 2020 was a dividing line. Except for one paper published in 2018 and two in 2019, the other 85 were published in the 2020-2022 period. In addition, there are also some monographs and anthologies on ELS (e.g. Li, 2020b; L.F. Wang, 2020; Xu, 2020).

Concepts of ELS in different names appeared in earlier papers dealing with language services and language planning. For example, Y. Li (2011) discusses languages used in emergencies of anti-

terrorism, anti-drug trafficking, peace-keeping, and disaster relief. Zhao (2016) maintains that ELS is an important part of the government's emergency capacity and an indispensable part of a country's emergency management. Qu (2016) discusses language services in all kinds of disastrous and abnormal situations. Some scholars have offered their definitions of ELS (e.g. Zhang, 2016; Fang, 2018; Wang & Sun, 2020; L.F. Wang, et. al., 2020; Zheng and Xu, 2020), which are similar to the one given by Teng (2018) mentioned in the Introduction above. Before 2020, discussions of ELS mainly focused on theoretical explorations, especially from the perspective of national language capacity (e.g. Li, 2011; Zhao, 2016; Wen, 2016); and very few on applied studies, apart from inspirations drawn from foreign experience (Zhang, 2016, 2020; Teng, 2018).

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has tremendously boosted studies on China's ELS, manifested as the upsurge of research papers, and more diversified topics, theoretical perspectives, and research methods. In terms of topics, existing studies mainly fall into the following types. First is foreign practice and experience, including those of Japan (e.g. Bao, 2020; Chen, 2020; Gu, 2020) and Turkey (Xiao, 2021). Second is the construction of language service corps. C. Wang (2020) reviews the practice, experience, and enlightenment of the epidemic-fighting language service group. Li and Wang (2020), Li et al. (2020), and H. Wang (2020b) discuss the components of professional ELS teams. Teng (2020b) and Qu et al. (2020) argue about the management and operation model of the ELS corps. Third is emergency language products (e.g. Ji and Li, 2020; L.N. Wang, 2020). Fourth is emergency language technologies. The cutting-edge corpus technology, translation technology, voice-to-words conversion technology, and other technologies have greatly facilitated the development of ELS products (e.g., Rao, 2020; G.W. Wang et al., 2020) and the spread of pandemic-related knowledge (Yang, 2020). Fifth is ELS talent training. In response to the acute shortage of ELS talent, several scholars have offered their suggestions

(e.g., Cai, 2020; Mu and Liu, 2020; Shen and Huang, 2020; Wang and Kang, 2020; Hua and Li, 2021; Li and Pan, 2021; Teng, 2021). Sixth is emergency discourse. From the macro perspective, China's emergency discourse construction should be enhanced in terms of emergency foreign language education and training, emergency translation and interpreting, emergency TV broadcast (Shen and Kang, 2020); while from the micro perspective, emergency discourse should be included in "emergency language studies" (Li and Rao, 2020) and studied with discourse or text analysis (Yu, 2020; Zhu and Yuan, 2021).

In terms of research perspectives and approaches, there are both conceptual theorizations of ELS from the macro perspective, such as Fang (2020), Li and Rao (2020), Qu (2020), Shen and Kang (2020), Teng (2020a, 2020b); C. Wang (2020), H. Wang (2020a), L.F. Wang et al. (2020) and Zhang and Li (2021) and applied studies based on specific research methods, such as corpus linguistics (e.g. Sun and Wu, 2020), and case studies (e.g. Liang, 2021; Y. Zheng, 2021).

Apart from the literature published in Chinese journals and anthologies, some are also published internationally (e.g. Li et al., 2020; P. Wang, 2020; Y. Zheng, 2020). But by comparison, China's ELS has shown little visibility in the international academic circle.

Though much of ELS has been covered in existing literature, there is still some room for improvement. First, the majority of papers are still conceptual theorizations without the support of empirical studies. Second, not much attention has been paid to the ELS in different scenarios by different entities. Third, few studies have focused on the experience of those directly involved in ELS. Therefore, this paper tries to address the following research questions:

How was ELS performed in China during the COVID-19 pandemic?

What were the features of China's ELS during the COVID-19 pandemic?

What might be the problems of China's ELS during the COVID-19 pandemic?

What can be done to improve China's ELS in the future?

3. Methodology

To answer the research questions, we rely on both desktop research and in-depth semi-structured interviews. The former ensures the comprehensiveness, authority, credibility, and timeliness of the information while the latter is used to confirm and supplement our findings from the first source. Due to the trust between the interviewer and the interviewees and their first-hand experience of ELS, they can offer some keen insights denied by desktop research.

3.1 Desktop research

The first type of data is taken from news reports on TV, radio, newspapers, mobile devices such as QQ or WeChat, and the internet between February and December of 2020 by keyword search "新冠 / 新冠肺炎 / 新冠疫情" (COVID-19/COVID-19 pandemic) + "语言服务 / 应急语言服务 / 语言应急服务 / 应急口译 / 笔译" (language service/emergency language service/language emergency service/ emergency interpreting/translation). With numerous reports coming from different sources, we mainly relied on those reported by CCTV, CGTN Radio, China Daily, Xinhuanet, sina.com, and sohu.com, all of which are authoritative and popular channels for information. After downloading the reports in written, oral, or audiovisual forms, we looked for ELS information, both positive and negative, and coded them individually before discussing them together to reach a consensus.

3.2 Interviews

In addition, we also resort to the second type of data, i.e., interviews of five people with ELS experience during the epidemic, including a translation and medical language service (MLS) teacher and researcher, a professional interpreter and interpreting teacher, a student interpreter, a language provider, and a head nurse in one of the rescue medical teams to Wuhan (see Table 1 for their profile).

The interviewees were selected by purposeful

sampling. When we selected the potential interviewees, we targeted people with direct experience in ELS during the pandemic, with each of them assuming a different role, so they could to some extent represent other people with similar experiences. To protect their privacy, they will be referred to by numbers only. All the collected data were analyzed qualitatively by following thematic coding and categorizing (Gibbs, 2007).

We strictly followed the research ethics of voluntariness, informed consent, and confidentiality. Before the interviews, all the interviewees were informed of the research objectives and were promised anonymity and voluntary participation. The interviews

were conducted in Chinese by the first author face-to-face in December 2020 and recorded with the consent of the interviewees. The interview outline includes the interviewees' participation in the ELS, i.e., their specific responsibilities, their length of services, their performances, their comments on the status quo of ELS, and their suggestions to improve the ELS if there were any. Each interview lasted about 20 minutes. The recordings were transcribed first automatically and then proofread by the authors before being sent to the interviewees for member check. If we disagreed with each other, we went back to the transcriptions a second or even a third time to reach an interrater consensus of 95% or above.

Table 1 Profile of Interviewees

Reference	Gender	Profession	Major responsibilities
Interviewee 1	Female	Translation and medical language service teacher and researcher	Co-translating a COVID-19 guidebook
Interviewee 2	Female	Professional interpreter and interpreting teacher	Interpreting at the airport, press conferences, and online medical consultation meetings
Interviewee 3	Male	Interpreting student	Interpreting at the airport
Interviewee 4	Male	Language provider	Coordinating various ELS
Interviewee 5	Female	Head nurse	Member of the medical rescue team to Wuhan

4. Results

With the two major types of data, answers to the four research questions are presented as follows.

4.1 Status quo

According to the content of services provided and the target users, China's ELS during the COVID-19 pandemic roughly falls into six categories, i.e., emergency translation, emergency interpreting, emergency consultation, and information services for foreign nationals, ELS for the disabled, emergency publicity, and emergency education.

First, emergency translation service was provided, including emergency intralingual translation between Putonghua and Hubei local dialects, and emergency interlingual translation between Chinese and foreign languages. Emergency dialect translation was needed when medical assistance teams from around the country to Hubei were confronted with the communication barriers imposed by the dialects of the local patients at the very beginning. To facilitate

doctor-patient communication and to popularize anti-epidemic knowledge, various handbooks were compiled. For example, the *Handbook of Hubei Dialects* was compiled by the Medical Assistance Team of Shandong Qilu Hospital for Hubei within 48 hours after their arrival, covering common expressions of salutations, daily life, and healthcare. The Ministry of Education (MoE) entrusted Beijing Language and Culture University to organize an Epidemic Language Service Corps consisting of over 100 scholars and experts from more than 30 institutions to help medical assistance teams to overcome language barriers. The Corps selected 156 words and 75 short sentences based on corpus statistics and medical field investigations to have voice alignments between Putonghua and the dialects of nine cities most seriously hit by the epidemic, produced and released the *Handbook of Hubei Dialects for Medical Assistance Teams* in seven versions, including WeChat, internet, mini-video, convergence media, Douyin, real-time dialect service

system, and instant dialect translation software. Moreover, the online phone service system was initiated on February 11th, 2020 to offer 24-hour phone service in the dialects of the nine cities (Epidemic Language Service Corps, 2020; Li et al., 2020).

At the same time, emergency translation between Chinese and foreign languages was needed on short notice. For example, an associate professor from a top foreign studies university in Beijing and the temporarily formed translation team of four people translated several dozen typical COVID-19 cases totaling over 10,000 words within 18 hours to be reported to the World Health Organization. They managed to overcome difficulties such as limited time, people, and resources.^[1] During the pandemic, assistance materials flocked to Hubei from around the world. Because of the diversity of languages involved, delivery of them to the right places for the right purposes was difficult at the very beginning. Given this, Shandong Translators Association offered landing services for overseas assistance medical materials to China. In addition, other volunteers from around the country also joined in the translations. Take Guangdong Translators Association as an example, its 269 members took part in 4,267 translation and interpreting tasks during the pandemic, totaling 32,540.5 hours, according to the official WeChat of Guangdong Translators Association on April 2nd, 2022.

Second, online and on-site emergency interpreting service was provided by volunteer interpreters. With the large influx of foreign nationals into China, emergency interpreting was required at airports, customs, quarantine centers, hospitals, and conferences. To facilitate timely information collection and screening of possible infectors, interpreters of various languages were called on for emergency interpreting. Both interviewees 2 and 3 had repetitively worked as emergency interpreters at Baiyun International Airport in Guangzhou, a major metropolis in South China. Translation and interpreting teachers and students from around the

country had made their due contributions in one way or another. For example, an interpreting teacher and professional interpreter from a top foreign studies university in Guangzhou interpreted for the WHO officials during their inspection tour in Wuhan.^[1] The translation company where Interviewee 4 came from mobilized large numbers of its in-house and volunteer interpreters to work at various localities where foreign nationals were involved. Apart from on-site interpreting, distance interpreting was also frequently and extensively used for the first time because online consultations and diagnoses involving relevant authorities, medical experts, and frontline doctors from China and around the world were frequently held on various platforms.

Third, emergency information and consultation services were extensively offered to foreign nationals in China, including multilingual service hotlines and multilingual information releases. Since January 25th, 2020, multilingual pandemic information services were quickly initiated around the country. For example, Beijing civilian service hotline 12345 offered epidemic information service in 8 foreign languages.^[2] Shanghai Hotline Service offered various ELS for foreign nationals in the city, such as basic information consultation, emergency translation, taxi-service translation, service complaint hotline, and mobile phone outsourcing hotline, involving languages of English, Japanese, Korean, German, Russian, French, Spanish, Malaysian, Indonesian, Portuguese, Arabic, Italian, and Serbo-Croatian. The English service is round the clock, while the Japanese, Korean and French ones are from 8 to 22 hours, and the rest are from 9 to 20 hours.^[3] According to the Ministry of Civil Affairs, during the pandemic in 2020, nearly 4,000 hotlines for psychological consultations were opened

[1] <https://www.fx361.com/page/2020/0328/6497414.shtml>.

[2] http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2020-04/02/content_5498320.htm.

[3] <https://www.yicai.com/news/100504835.html>.

nationwide, serving about three million people.^[1]

Fourth, ELS for people with disabilities was offered. For example, to facilitate the hard-of-hearing people, sign language interpreting was provided in news releases of the pandemic on major TV channels; transcriptions of the press conferences were provided on related websites; China Association of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing shot sign-language anti-epidemic videos to popularize epidemic knowledge and had volunteers persuade sign language users from going out during the pandemic; various technology companies offered free voice-to-speech conversion service for the hard-of-hearing people; and various online courses also offered subtitles of the course contents (X. Zheng, 2020, 2021).

Fifth, emergency publicity services were carried out to popularize epidemic knowledge, and to eliminate rumors about the epidemic. Governments at various levels, businesses, and educational institutions all established the column “Fighting against the COVID-19 Epidemic” on their portals, offering news reports, service information, developments of the epidemic, and prevention and control knowledge. There were daily updates of the pandemic on the internet, TV, radio, mobile devices, and in the press to keep the public well-informed. Various guidebooks and popular readings targeting different readers have been published in multiple languages, such as *Guidance for the Public on Protective Measures against Coronavirus Disease*, *Plain Chinese for Epidemic Prevention and Control*, *A Guide to the Prevention and Control of the COVID-19 Epidemic in Foreign Language*, *The Coronavirus Prevention Handbook: 101 Science-Based Tips that could Save Your Life*, and *A Picture Book of COVID-19 Knowledge to Children*, to name just a few. In 2020, China delivered health kits and Spring Festival packages that included medical assistance materials and anti-pandemic handbooks to over five million Chinese living in more than 100 countries.^[2] In addition, epidemic prevention and control knowledge has been offered in all kinds of public places.

Sixth, online education was carried out nationwide from primary to tertiary levels lasting from two months to the whole spring semester of 2020. In universities where foreign teachers were not able to come back to China, it even continued in the autumn semester and 2021. For courses involving both domestic and international students, the online and offline blended mode of instruction was practiced. When sporadic cases broke out in some cities in 2022, online education became a new normal. Because of the strong support of technologies, online instruction was overall smoothly conducted. Courses such as translation and interpreting which had been thought to be difficult if not impossible to be instructed online (Xu et al., 2021a) were delivered successfully (Ren, 2020; Xu et al., 2021b), which have greatly boosted online translation and interpreting education and its research. In addition, various language service platforms and content resources were provided free of charge or at reduced prices. For example, a lot of publishing houses offered their electronic language publications and language teaching resources free of charge to the whole country. China Central Television (CCTV) and various provincial and municipal TV stations also offered free online primary and secondary courses as alternatives to individual teaching.

4.2 Features of China's ELS

China's ELS during the COVID-19 pandemic has shown the following distinctive features. First, the demands for ELS were unprecedented in China since it had never been struck by disasters that had affected so many people and places or had incurred so huge damages. In 2020, almost all provinces and autonomous regions in China found confirmed cases, so ELS was needed on a national scale. Second, ELS was needed in different scenarios and for different

[1] <http://www.mca.gov.cn/article/xw/mtbd/202005/20200500027615.shtml>.

[2] https://language.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202103/09/WS60470bb1a31024ad0baade0_4.html.

purposes. It not only served medical purposes in medical settings but also covered all aspects of social and personal life. Third, both intra- and inter-lingual translation and interpreting were needed, which was an unprecedented situation for China's ELS. Fourth, ELS was mainly provided by volunteers, especially professional and ad hoc translators and interpreters, translation and interpreting teachers and students, and foreign languages teachers and students. They were called on for various emergency translation and interpreting services on short notice. Fifth, technologies have played a vital role all the way through. For example, intelligent speech technologies, such as voice recognition, semantic understanding, natural language processing, and voice interactions were used in intelligent screening and AI-assisted diagnosis and treatment. To guarantee the smooth running of online education, interpreting, working, and conferencing, various software, platforms, and Apps, such as Tencent Meeting, WeChat, QQ, Rain Classroom, Zoom, and Ding Talk were provided by technology companies during the national lockdown (Mao, 2020). It is not exaggerating to say that without technological support, online education would not have been possible, let alone successful. In addition, language technology products such as intelligent robots have been connected to the websites of governments, hospitals, WeChat public accounts, and Apps to offer information query services.

However, despite the achievements, because of the unexpectedness and seriousness of the pandemic, there is still room for improvement, which is elaborated as follows.

4.3 Inadequacies of China's ELS

First, there were no relevant laws and regulations. Though in the past two decades, China has promulgated several policies and regulations concerning public emergencies, such as *Regulations on Preparedness for and Responses to Emergent Public Health Hazards* in 2003; the *National Overall Emergency Plan of Public Emergencies* in 2006, and the *Law of the People's Republic of China on Emergency*

Response in 2008, they do not include any content of ELS (Li, 2020a).

Second, there was no national leadership of ELS or inter-regional or inter-industrial coordination mechanisms or organizations, so during the national rescue work, most ELS activities during the initial stage were conducted voluntarily rather than under the unified leadership of a national authority or some coordinating organizations, resulting in difficulties in releasing and managing precise, efficient, transparent and unified multilingual information of the epidemic, and in finding the suitable personnel for certain specific ELS tasks (L.F. Wang et al., 2020). Interview 4, the language provider, told us that in the initial stage of the pandemic, emergency translation and interpreting tasks were entrusted through personal contacts, rather than through official channels, but later on, some governmental institutions such as the provincial and municipal foreign affairs offices and translators and interpreters' associations shouldered the responsibilities to communicate between the supply and demand sides of ELS.

Third, there were no national or local ELS talent banks or databases to provide well-targeted information on ELS talent and to summon them for ELS on the shortest notice. There also lacked multilingual service information platforms and emergency call centers, so ELS information had to be released and disseminated through various channels, such as WeChat groups, moments, and public accounts, QQ groups, and the internet so ELS could be delayed. According to the experience of Interviewees 1 and 2, they were called on for the translation and interpreting tasks by their friends, acquaintances, or colleagues who happened to know the demands, instead of by any professional translators and interpreters' associations they are affiliated to.

Fourth, there were insufficient numbers of qualified ELS talent. As mentioned above, most ELS providers were volunteers, especially Master of Translation and Interpreting (MTI) students who had not been trained in their regular curricula to

cope with emergencies in terms of subject-specific knowledge and psychological preparedness, because most MTI programs in China do not offer ELS-related courses and only some of them train medical translators and interpreters. When MTI students were entrusted with emergency medical translation and/or interpreting tasks, they struggled professionally and/or emotionally. For example, Interviewee 3, a student interpreter, admitted that as he had not been trained specially as a medical interpreter, he was unfamiliar with the necessary medical terms. Though he managed to complete the interpreting tasks, he suffered from great psychological pressure. According to Interviewee 3, his female classmates were even more frustrated than him when doing emergency interpreting. The insufficiencies of translators and interpreters of less commonly used languages and sign language were even more acute, and MTI students of language combinations other than Chinese-English had to work longer and more frequently due to the insufficient numbers of qualified interpreters available.

Fifth, dialects, ethnic-minority languages, and less-commonly-used languages had received inadequate attention. China's ELS experience during the pandemic reveals that not only major languages of the world, but also dialects of various places, ethnic-minority languages, and less-commonly-used languages were needed for efficient and effective ELS. Among the ethnic minorities, the elderly and the undereducated who can only speak their ethnic languages or local dialects, are disadvantaged in ELS which is mainly offered in Putonghua. Moreover, foreign nationals who did not speak Chinese or English might feel helpless in their search for information and assistance. Interviewee 5, the head nurse, one of the assistant medical workers to Wuhan, told us her frustration when she first arrived there. She speaks Swatow dialect as her mother tongue and Putonghua and Cantonese in her work in Guangzhou. When the patients in Wuhan talk to her in the various dialects of Hubei Province, she was completely at a loss, because the pronunciations and intonations were

quite different from Putonghua. As the hospital was operated in a closed circuit, she could not resort to external help but to the newly developed handbook of Hubei dialects and the local colleagues.

Sixth, ELS for people with disabilities deserved more attention. When ELS was offered during the fight against the pandemic, people with disabilities were not given priority attention, which was manifested by such facts as the insufficient use of sign language interpreting for the hard-of-hearing, time lag in compiling anti-epidemic handbooks in braille, and lack of consultation hotlines specially designed for the disabled people.

4.4 Suggestions for China's ELS

According to the interviews and our observations, the following suggestions are offered to improve China's ELS.

First, it is necessary to further regulate and standardize China's ELS by formulating more specific guidelines based on existing laws and regulations of emergency services. In this respect, ELS rules and regulations of many countries are good references, such as the *Language Access Plan* of the US, *Basic Disaster Management Plan and White Papers on Disaster Management* of Japan, *Guide to Preparing a Major Emergency Plan* of Ireland, *Emergency Preparedness Guidance* of the UK, and *National Civil Defense Emergency of Management Plan* of New Zealand, which all try to guarantee the access and quality of ELS to all in emergencies. By referring to such exemplars, China can formulate its ELS laws and regulations to cater to the needs of its people and foreign nationals.

Second, to tackle the problem of the lack of a national ELS leadership, the State Language Commission, China Academy of Translation, or any other competent institutions can be designated as the national leadership of ELS, responsible for formulating rules and regulations, designing the overall plan of ELS, managing and coordinating subordinate ELS organizations, talent banks, and networks at different levels, releasing and disseminating ELS information,

ELS talent training, and accreditation information, and other ELS-related matters at the national level. The Central Disaster Prevention Council of Japan, which is chaired by the Prime Minister and composed of the entire Cabinet including the Minister of State for Disaster Management, and heads of designated public institutions and experts, is a good example for China.

Third, to facilitate timely and effective ELS communication and implementation, national and local talent banks and networks and coordinated talent and resource sharing mechanisms are urgently needed. China can learn from the National Language Service Corps (NLSC) of the US by establishing ELS talent banks and networks at different levels and by recruiting language service volunteers nationwide or even worldwide who have to first pass certain language testing before providing their services. According to Interviewee 4, the ELS talent banks can be established by the existing translators and interpreters' associations at various levels as their subordinate organizations or as independently-run ones. Volunteers can choose the time that is convenient to them, the forms of services they are good at or feel comfortable with, such as on the phone, online, or on-site; and the fields and languages/dialects they are most proficient in. The more detailed a volunteer's profile is, the better. In normal times, it is important to keep the volunteers updated and networked so that in case of emergencies, they can be easily accessible. In addition, with the popularization of technologies and interdisciplinary integration, it has become increasingly easier to share ELS talent and resources in different parts of China or even the whole world and across different disciplines and industries.

Fourth, higher education institutions (HEIs) can play a major role in training more ELS talent through both degree and non-degree courses. On the one hand, degree programs in language services and/or ELS can be offered by HEIs which are equipped with the necessary teachers and facilities, especially those engaged in Bachelor of Translation and Interpreting (BTI) and MTI education. Interviewee 1 was proud

that her faculty has run medical translation and interpreting workshops for several years on end, offering targeted training to hundreds of MTI students and medical professionals. Similarly, Interviewee 3 hoped that MTI programs could offer more domain-specific courses and psychological training to their students to better prepare them professionally and psychologically for various emergencies. MTI programs can also train their students as ELS managers who are responsible for organizing training activities, collecting ELS information, allocating ELS tasks, and communicating with counterparts at home and abroad. On the other hand, non-degree training programs can be provided by HEIs and various social training institutions to popularize the knowledge and countermeasures of ELS. Related HEIs can develop various online and offline training courses for different parties concerned, such as medical workers, foreign nationals working, studying, living, and/or traveling in China, and people with limited ability in Putonghua. The VOCAL-Medical project, a two-year Leonardo da Vinci Transfer of Innovation Program funded by the EU Commission (Brogan et al., 2015), and volunteer organizations such as Translators without Borders (TwBs) (O'Brien, 2016) are good examples for China to learn from. People with little training in translation and interpreting can take translation and interpreting courses while foreign languages and translation and interpreting students who lack specific subject knowledge can take courses in certain disciplines. In that case, professionals of various disciplines, and translators and interpreters, be they professional, semiprofessional, or ad hoc, can offer timely and effective ELS in emergencies. At the same time, HEIs in different localities may offer ELS training that can cater to local emergencies in their specific social and geographical conditions. For example, in places where earthquakes are frequent occurrences, training of ELS for seismological disasters is desirable. In addition, teachers and HEIs with successful ELS practicing and training experiences are encouraged to develop them into textbooks to facilitate ELS talent training.

Fifth, the ELS needs of special groups of people deserve more attention. For people who only speak local dialects, ethnic-minority languages, and foreign languages, the above-mentioned handbooks of dialects have proven necessary and successful practices of ELS. At the same time, we can also learn from Japan's "Easy Japanese", a simplified version of Japanese for easy communication in emergencies (Wang & Qu, 2020) in developing survival Putonghua with basic grammar and vocabulary, and a phonetic system approximate to Putonghua for minimum communication. The multi-ethnicity, the huge non-Putonghua-speaking population, the large influx of foreign visitors, and the complex geographical conditions in China all make the popularization of survival Putonghua urgent (Si and Wang, 2020). At the same time, more attention should be paid to disadvantaged people, such as those with disabilities or special needs. For example, the hard-of-hearing and the mute demand sign language interpreting (McKee, 2014), and blind people need braille, but in emergency cases, they can be easily ignored. In addition, the ELS for speakers of less-commonly-used languages should also be enhanced to guarantee their timely access to ELS in emergencies.

Lastly, R&D of ELS technologies can be carried out in earnest. In this era of AI and big data, language technologies are making rapid progress. For example, translation Apps on mobile devices or as standalone facilities can take the place of human translators and/or interpreters in daily communication. Similar translation and interpreting devices can also be developed between Putonghua and different dialects and between Chinese and the less-commonly-used languages for people with special needs. Moreover, as technology companies, platforms, and apps play a vital role in guaranteeing the smooth running of online education, online translation, online interpreting, online conferencing, and online working, further cooperation and collaboration are expected to avoid repeated construction and disordered application. In addition, distance communication platforms can be developed to facilitate exchanges and sharing of

ELS practices and experiences with the international community. In short, technologies should be further developed to cater to the different ELS needs of different people in society.

5. Conclusion

This study tries to inspect China's ELS during the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, in which emergency translation and interpreting played a prominent role, not only between languages but also between dialects, not only for doctors and patients but also for all people in society. In addition, other forms of ELS such as emergency multilingual hotline service, emergency news releases, emergency education, and emergency publicity were all carried out in full swing. In sum, despite some drawbacks, China's ELS has stood the test of the pandemic and developed vigorously.

In the new era when the building of a global community with a shared future is the common aspiration of mankind and when disasters are becoming more frequent and more unpredictable, the quality and quantity of ELS are of even greater importance. This study has expanded the concept of ELS to include intralingual translation and interpreting, and emergency education, enriching the research content of ELS by sharing China's practices and experiences, and enabling the international community to understand more accurately and more objectively China's ELS during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Moreover, the merits and demerits discussed can serve as a reference for policymakers, ELS scholars, and practitioners. Though as argued by Cadwell (2020), ELS is context-rich, China's ELS during the pandemic, both successful and not so successful, is valuable not only to itself but also to other countries because, on the one hand, the international community can learn how to better prepare themselves in case of similar emergencies, and on the other hand, they can also learn from China's successful practices and try to avoid similar pitfalls. The suggestions offered can

boost the sound development of ELS in China and other contexts. As the whole world is interrelated, only when all countries join hands can we win the final victory against the pandemic and create a better future for mankind.

Admittedly, due to the huge amount of information available and the complexity of ELS, we may not have covered all aspects of China's ELS. In addition, though all the interviewees had first-hand ELS experience during the pandemic, the small sample size compared with the huge numbers of people involved nationwide may affect the generalizability of the research findings. Future studies on the topic can involve more research methods such as large-scale questionnaire surveys, case studies, and experiments and try to involve more respondents to achieve more objective and more comprehensive results.

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