

Life as Ardern's sign-language interpreter

Level 3 • Advanced

1 Warmer

Rank these jobs in order from 1 (most stressful) to 5 (least stressful). Give reasons for your choice.

1. _____ a. airline pilot
2. _____ b. interpreter
3. _____ c. firefighter
4. _____ d. journalist
5. _____ e. taxi-driver

2 Key words

Fill the gaps in the sentences using these key words from the text.

rowdy
sign language

captivated
staple

stuffy
high-profile

tussle
overlap

terse
boost

1. If you are _____ by something, you are very attracted to or interested in it.
2. A _____ is a regular and important part or feature of something.
3. _____ is a way of communicating with people who cannot hear, using hand signals instead of words.
4. A _____ is something that helps you feel more positive or more confident.
5. _____ people are noisy and cause trouble.
6. A _____ room is too warm and has an unpleasant smell because there is no fresh air in it.
7. A _____ is a fight or argument between people.
8. If things _____, one starts before the other ends.
9. A _____ comment or remark is very short and often shows that the person making it is annoyed.
10. _____ people are often seen in public or on TV, or mentioned in newspapers.

3 Find the information

Find the following information in the text as quickly as possible.

1. Which two languages did Alan Wendt grow up speaking?
2. Which other two languages does he speak now?
3. Have sign-language interpreters been employed by New Zealand prime ministers before?
4. How often does the New Zealand prime minister hold press conferences?
5. How often did the prime minister say 'no comment' at a recent press conference?
6. In which New Zealand city was there a terrorist attack on a mosque?

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'Like juggling and doing gym': life as Ardern's sign-language interpreter

Alan Wendt is the first interpreter to be regularly employed by a New Zealand prime minister – and he has had a busy year

Eleanor Ainge Roy

7 June, 2019

- 1 When Alan Wendt was a child, watching the Miss Universe contest with his mother was an annual highlight. While she oohed and aahed over the dresses, young Wendt was captivated by the interpreter who translated for the Spanish-speaking contestants. "I thought it was complete magic, that he could render it so fast for a live TV audience. It was amazing," says Wendt.
- 2 Thirty years on, Wendt, 40, has himself become a staple on New Zealand television screens as Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's sign-language interpreter – the first ever employed by a New Zealand prime minister on a regular basis.
- 3 Interpreters were occasionally deployed during natural disasters by previous governments, but Wendt has become a permanent fixture on the television after Ardern requested in 2018 that a sign-language interpreter be by her side at her weekly press conferences. He was also called on during other major press conferences, including after the Christchurch massacre.
- 4 Ardern says having Wendt by her side totally changed the atmosphere for her and gave her a boost of confidence when facing a rowdy press pack. "I went from press conferences being quite a long and lonely experience to now having Alan by my side every Monday," says Ardern. "There's something about having someone next to you whose singular focus is to make sure as many New Zealanders as possible know what is going on at parliament. And he does it with a smile. I find it really reassuring."
- 5 Wendt, a senior interpreter for Deaf Aoteroa, says he will never forget his first press conference. A stuffy and overheated room in parliament house. A pack of vociferous journalists. And the tense, tit-for-tat, rapid-fire dialogue that defines the prime minister's public tussle with the media every week, which is livestreamed on Facebook and other platforms. "What I remember most is being nervous ... I did feel the pressure," says Wendt, who also speaks Samoan and German.
- 6 "Any simultaneous interpreter who does work like this will tell you that one of the battles we face is speed. So when people are using language that is dense or technical, and at speed, then that is a big challenge."
- 7 Wendt says it is "impossible" to interpret multiple voices overlapping, so when the media form a "united front" to press the prime minister on certain issues, he is often playing catch up and finding ways to insert questions after they have already been asked or answered. "It's a bit like juggling while doing gymnastics, cognitively. So it's quite a heavy cognitive load to carry. At the end of it, I am exhausted. I have times where I hop in my car and fall straight asleep because I am just like: 'Aghhh, that was so much'."
- 8 At a recent press conference, the prime minister said "no comment" more than a dozen times when questioned about the case of kidnapped Red Cross nurse Louisa Akavi. Visibly frustrated, Ardern's "no comments" became more terse as the questioning intensified, a tone and emotion Wendt is also responsible for capturing. "When someone says 'no comment', it means more than one thing right? 'No comment' can mean I am not *able* to say anything. I am not *wanting* to say anything. Or I am not *willing* to say anything," says Wendt. "I can find an equivalent quickly to convey that sense of frustration ... there are ways we can give fuller access to what is going on."
- 9 Wendt grew up in a bilingual home speaking English and Samoan and had no connection to the deaf community before taking a sign-language course at Victoria University "on a whim" 20 years ago.
- 10 Wendt was there when the prime minister delivered her first words after the Christchurch mosque attacks and admits it is sometimes difficult to keep a lid on his emotions. "The purpose of interpreting is to provide access to communication. So you have to do your best to really suppress your own emotional responses and your own sensitivities and your own fears maybe at the time."
- 11 Wendt's high-profile work has given him a rare insight into the prime minister. "She is quite accessible as a speaker. She is speaking about quite complex ideas, but for me at least, it is never in a way that is impenetrable. And that

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certainly makes my job easier. The craft and the care with which she does talk makes it easier.”

- 12 When emotions run high – such as after Christchurch – Wendt says he uses his face to convey meaning; reflecting Ardern's emotions and on some days, the emotions of a nation. “Sign language generally requires you to use your face. The face is used grammatically, and there are different movements on the face that

will give you an indication of syntax,” says Wendt. “But in terms of interpreting, if the prime minister is showing emotion, that's something I don't need to be interpreting, because you can see it right there.”

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4 Comprehension check

Choose the best answer according to the text.

- When Alan Wendt watched Miss Universe with his mother as a child, what interested him the most?
 - the dresses of the contestants
 - the fact that the contestants were Spanish
 - the skill of the interpreter
- How does Jacinda Ardern feel about having Alan Wendt at her side during press conferences?
 - She feels more confident than she did before.
 - She feels that she now has a singular focus.
 - She feels nervous and under pressure.
- What does Alan Wendt find 'impossible'?
 - to avoid falling asleep after press conferences
 - to interpret when lots of journalists are asking questions at the same time
 - to insert questions after they have already been asked
- What does Alan Wendt use to convey emotion?
 - his hands
 - his body language
 - his face

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5 Find the word

Find the following words and phrases in the text.

1. a three-word verb meaning *make approving noises about something you like very much* (para 1)
2. a verb meaning *use* (para 3)
3. a two-word noun phrase meaning *a group of journalists that follow a famous person or report on an important event* (para 4)
4. an adjective meaning *loud and forceful* (para 5)
5. a three-word prepositional phrase meaning *done as a result of a sudden feeling that you must do something* (para 9)
6. a six-word verb phrase meaning *ensure that your emotions are strictly under control* (para 10)
7. a three-word expression used to indicate that people are angry or upset about something (para 12)
8. a noun meaning *the rules about how words are arranged and connected to make phrases and sentences* (para 12)

6 Verb + noun collocations

Match the verbs in the left-hand column with the nouns or noun phrases in the right-hand column to make expressions from the text.

- | | |
|-----------|------------------------|
| 1. convey | a. pressure |
| 2. show | b. a united front |
| 3. become | c. emotion |
| 4. feel | d. a course |
| 5. form | e. meaning |
| 6. take | f. a permanent fixture |

7 Word-building

Complete the sentences using the correct form of the word in brackets at the end of each sentence.

1. Sign language requires you to use your face _____. [GRAMMAR]
2. The press conference room in parliament house is often stuffy and _____. [HEAT]
3. As a child, Alan Wendt was captivated by the interpreter who translated for the Spanish-speaking _____ at the Miss Universe contest. [CONTEST]
4. Jacinda Ardern finds Alan Wendt's presence beside her _____. [ASSURE]
5. Alan Wendt believes interpreters have to suppress their own emotional _____. [RESPOND]
6. He says that Jacinda Ardern never speaks in an _____ way. [PENETRATE]

8 Discussion

Discuss the statements.

- There are some things you just can't translate.
- The key to learning another language is practice not theory.
- Everyone should learn at least one foreign language.

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KEY

2 Key words

1. captivated
2. staple
3. sign language
4. boost
5. rowdy
6. stuffy
7. tussle
8. overlap
9. terse
10. high-profile

3 Find the information

1. English and Samoan
2. German and sign language
3. Interpreters were occasionally deployed during natural disasters by previous governments.
4. every week
5. more than a dozen times
6. Christchurch

4 Comprehension check

1. c
2. a
3. b
4. c

5 Find the word

1. ooh and aah
2. deploy
3. press pack
4. vociferous
5. on a whim
6. keep a lid on your emotions
7. emotions run high
8. syntax

6 Verb + noun collocations

1. e
2. c
3. f
4. a
5. b
6. d

7 Word-building

1. grammatically
2. overheated (or *hot*)
3. contestants
4. reassuring
5. responses
6. impenetrable