

Life as Ardern's sign-language interpreter

Level 2 • Upper intermediate

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. The paragraph numbers are given to help you.

sign language
reassuring

bilingual
interpreter

rowdy
amazing

exhausted
stuffy

insight
convey

1. An _____ is someone whose job is to translate what a speaker is saying in one language into another language. (para 1)
2. If something is _____, it is both surprising and impressive. (para 1)
3. _____ is a way of communicating with people who cannot hear, using hand signals instead of words. (para 2)
4. _____ people are noisy and cause trouble. (para 4)
5. If something is _____, it makes you feel less worried. (para 4)
6. A _____ room is too warm and has an unpleasant smell because there is no fresh air in it. (para 5)
7. If you are _____, you are extremely tired. (para 6)
8. A _____ person can speak two languages extremely well. (para 7)
9. An _____ is a chance to understand or learn more about someone or something. (para 9)
10. If you _____ ideas or feelings, you communicate them indirectly. (para 9)

3 Find the information

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

1. How old is Alan Wendt?
2. How often does the New Zealand prime minister hold press conferences?
3. Which two languages did Wendt grow up speaking?
4. Which other two languages does he speak now?
5. When did he take his sign-language course?
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

Eleanor Ainge Roy

7 June, 2019

- 1 When Alan Wendt was a child, he used to watch the Miss Universe contest with his mother. While she admired the dresses, young Wendt was more interested in the interpreter who translated for the Spanish-speaking contestants. "I thought it was complete magic, that he could do it so fast for a live TV audience. It was amazing," says Wendt.
- 2 Thirty years later, Wendt, 40, has himself become a regular 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 used during natural disasters by previous governments, but Wendt is now a permanent fixture on television after Ardern requested that a sign-language interpreter be by her side at her weekly press conferences. He is also with her 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 more confidence when talking to a rowdy press pack. "Press conferences used to be quite a long and lonely experience. Now Alan is by my side every Monday," says Ardern. "There's something about having someone next to you whose only aim 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 says he will never forget his first press conference. A stuffy and overheated room in parliament house. A group of noisy journalists. And the tense, quick dialogue that defines the prime minister's public meeting 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 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." Another challenge is to interpret when several people are asking questions at the same time. "At the end of it, I am exhausted," he says. "I have times where I jump in my car and fall straight asleep."
- 7 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.
- 8 Wendt was there when the prime minister delivered her first words after the Christchurch mosque attacks and admits it is sometimes difficult to control his emotions. "The purpose of interpreting is to provide access to communication. So you have to do your best to suppress your own emotional responses and your own sensitivities and your own fears."
- 9 Wendt's 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 impossible to convey. And that certainly makes my job easier. The craft and the care with which she talks makes it easier."
- 10 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. "With sign language, you generally have 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

Are these statements true (T) or false (F) according to the text?

1. When Alan Wendt watched Miss Universe with his mother as a child, he was most interested in the skill of the interpreter.
2. He is the third sign-language interpreter to be employed regularly by a New Zealand prime minister.
3. Jacinda Ardern feels more confident when Alan Wendt is standing beside her at press conferences.
4. Speed is a problem for interpreters.
5. Wendt never finds it difficult to control his emotions.
6. He uses his face to express meaning.

5 Find the word

Find the following words and phrases in the text.

1. a four-word prepositional phrase meaning *regularly* (para 2)
2. a three-word noun phrase meaning *someone who is considered to be established in a job, place etc* (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 *too hot* (para 5)
5. a three-word prepositional phrase meaning *done as a result of a sudden feeling that you must do something* (para 7)
6. a verb meaning *stop yourself feeling an emotion* (para 8)
7. a three-word expression used to indicate that people are angry or upset about something (para 10)
8. a noun meaning *the rules about how words are arranged and connected to make phrases and sentences* (para 10)

6 Two-word expressions

Match the words in the left-hand column with those in the right-hand column to make expressions from the text.

- | | |
|--------------|----------------|
| 1. natural | a. response |
| 2. press | b. disaster |
| 3. emotional | c. TV audience |
| 4. rare | d. ideas |
| 5. live | e. insight |
| 6. complex | f. conference |

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7 Word-building

Complete the table using words from the text.

	verb	noun
1.	contest	(person)
2.	interpret	(person)
3.	respond	
4.	move	
5.	indicate	
6.	speak	(person)

8 Discussion

Discuss the statements.

- 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. interpreter
2. amazing
3. sign language
4. rowdy
5. reassuring
6. stuffy
7. exhausted
8. bilingual
9. insight
10. convey

3 Find the information

1. 40
2. every week
3. English and Samoan
4. German and sign language
5. 20 years ago
6. Christchurch

4 Comprehension check

1. T
2. F
3. T
4. T
5. F
6. T

5 Find the word

1. on a regular basis
2. a permanent fixture
3. press pack
4. overheated
5. on a whim
6. suppress
7. emotions run high
8. syntax

6 Two-word expressions

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

7 Word-building

1. contestant
2. interpreter
3. response
4. movement
5. indication
6. speaker