THE DIFFERENT FACES OF INTERPRETING EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES

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Abstract

The fields in which interpreting is used encompass every area of life, and in many of those fields trying to use unprofessional, ad hoc interpreters can be damaging. As of the beginning of the twenty-first century interpreting programs are on the rise in U.S. academia, but since they are offered randomly across the country they present little coherence as far as educational sequence and consistency. Hence there is an increasing need to standardize interpreting educational programs and to establish guidelines for their construction and implementation. This article discusses the process of the academization of interpreting training in its current early stage in the United States. Based on the case of a project developed and implemented in North Carolina, it proposes a comprehensive and complementary approach to interpreting education in the United States.

Keywords

Interpreting, education, professionalization.

Interpreting is the second-oldest profession in the world. Since the time of the first contact between tribes, communication between different societies and ethnicities was necessary. During conquests (by the Roman Empire, of the Americas), evangelization, and colonization, different figures played the role of interpreters—from slaves, soldiers, and diplomats to the missionaries who performed interpreting as a job critical to the outcomes of their missions. World War I, World War II, and the twentieth-century changes to the world map dictated more communication at the pan-national level. Interpreters thus began to play an integral part during the formation of the League of Nations and then the United Nations (Deslisle and Woodsworth; Baigorri-Jalón; Furmanek). At that time interpreters were considered a marvel since no one could understand how they were able to do their work. The activity of perceiving something in one language and producing it on the spot in another seemed to many, and still does at times, the result of mysterious, mystifying, and supernatural power.
As the need for communication between languages increased, naturally born interpreters (Harris; Harris and Sherwood)—usually people raised in multilingual families, children of diplomats and displaced families of upper-level society, as well as children of immigrants regardless of their social class—previously used for the job have been increasingly replaced by graduates from academic programs (Valdés). The first graduate school program in interpreting was established in Paris in the 1950s. The influx of immigrants due to political changes in Eastern Europe, Africa, Asia, and Latin America in the second part of the twentieth century, coupled with the need to provide access to services for immigrants in their host countries, brought to the forefront local community-related interpreting and the demand for interpreters in everyday life (Mikkelson; Wadensjo; Niska; Valero-Garcés and Martin).

The fields in which interpreting and translation are used encompass every area of life. In many of those fields engaging unprofessional, ad hoc interpreters can be damaging. A widespread misconception about abilities and preparation in translation and interpreting is that anyone who is bilingual can perform the job (Salaets and van Gucht; Setton and Liangliang); however, this is not true. Does knowing biology and anatomy suffice to be a doctor? Does being good at drawing and knowing math mean that one can be an architect? To become an interpreter or a translator knowing different languages is only a necessary prerequisite. Among other attributes, the profession requires interpersonal skills, ethical knowledge, cultural proficiency, and the ability to adjust to different speakers’ needs.

Whether interpreters are born or made is a question that has been asked since the introduction of interpreting schools. Several findings seem to indicate that interpreters’ education at any level is indispensable for quality performance (Valdés, Angelelli and Chávez, Valdés). However, recent discussions on curriculum design have again brought up the question of the psychological profile of an interpreter. This issue was introduced when Kurz contrasted the psychological profile of translators and interpreters. The need to explore the interpreter’s profile arises from the perception of an interpreter as helper, communication broker, assistant, troubleshooter, and advocate rather than simply a language specialist (Beltrán-Avery; Angelelli, Revisiting the Interpreter’s Role: A Study of Conference, Court, and Medical Interpreters; Sela-Sheffy and Shlesinger).

Today educational programs at first- and second-cycle levels in higher education, workshops, and seminars for training both conference and non-conference interpreters are offered on a regular or non-regular basis in almost every country. In 2010 over 300 schools offering degrees, with a wide range of quality, in translation and interpreting (both programs are still combined at many educational institutions) were identified worldwide through the
AIIC survey of interpreting schools. Interpreting programs at pre-graduate, undergraduate, and graduate level are also on the rise in U.S. academia. At present the following levels of education in interpreting are offered in the United States:

1. Community college Certificate
2. Two-year community college Associate Degree
3. Bachelor of Arts
4. Graduate Certificate
5. One- or two-year Master of Arts
6. PhD – the only program is in American Sign Language interpreting at Gallaudet University, however, courses in interpreting are part of PhD programs in translation.

In contrast to many European countries with a long-standing tradition in the didactics of written and oral translation, these programs, offered randomly across the country, present little coherence as far as educational sequence and consistency. There is thus an increasing need to standardize educational programs and to establish guidelines for their design and implementation. While the beginning of the twenty-first century has brought an international stream of pedagogy-related materials (e.g., D. Sawyer’s 2004 *Fundamental Aspects of Interpreter Education*; M. Tennent’s 2005 *Training for the New Millennium*; and D. Gile’s 2009 revised edition of *Basic Concepts and Models for Interpreter and Translator Training*), a national discussion on the application of these findings in regard to types of programs, range of topics, preparation of instructors, admission requirements, and job profiles for the graduates appears to be urgent in the United States.

This paper, based on the solutions proposed in North Carolina for healthcare interpreting, contributes to the above-mentioned discussion by comparing and contrasting an entry-level two-year associate degree in healthcare interpreting offered at a community college with a one-year intense MA degree in interpreting and translation at a research university. The goal is to demonstrate the differences in terms of preparation of graduates and their readiness to engage in the profession upon graduation.

**The Need for Structured Education: An Example of a Healthcare Setting in North Carolina**

Across the United States healthcare providers are encountering an increasing number of patients with limited English proficiency (LEP), defined as speaking English less than very well or not at all. Among these patients the Hispanic (and, slowly, also Asian) population is overrepresented and faces significant challenges when navigating the U.S. healthcare system.
These challenges complicate the provision of effective healthcare and health education.

Aside from legal language specialists and interpreters for the deaf and hard of hearing, medical interpreters are currently in highest demand among public service linguists in the United States. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, employment of interpreters and translators is projected to increase 24 percent over the 2006-2016 period, a more rapid rate than the average for all other occupations. The increasing technical and legal challenges associated with delivering adequate healthcare to Americans of diverse ethnic backgrounds require professional cross-cultural communicators who apply an ethical code to their understanding of the dynamics of language and various medical and sociocultural contexts (Angelelli, *Medical Interpreting and Revisiting the Interpreter’s Role*; Hsieh).

**States with Fastest-Growing Hispanic Populations between 2000 and 2008**

(U.S. Census Bureau)

- South Carolina 93.5%
- South Dakota 92.8%
- Tennessee 86.8%
- Arkansas 83.6%
- North Carolina 80.7%

In North Carolina — ranked fifth in the above table on fastest growing populations — the Hispanic population increased by more than 500 percent in the last decade. Accounting for 6.3 percent of the North Carolina population, it is the fastest-growing ethnic group in the state (North Carolina Institute for Minority Economic Development, 2004). This population is comprised primarily of young adults from Mexico, Central America, and other Latin American countries as well as from Puerto Rico. In 2007 the median age of the Hispanic population in the United States was estimated at 27.6 years, compared to a median age of 36.6 years for the population as a whole. Over the last five years North Carolina Baptist Hospital (NCBH), part of the Wake Forest University Baptist Medical Center (WFUBMC), has experienced a 130 percent increase in Spanish-speaking patient registrations. Additionally, Spanish interpreter encounters at NCBH have increased 65 percent over the last three years. The Downtown Health Plaza, a department of WFUBMC offering general health, public health, and other community services to all residents of Forsyth county, has experienced a 17 percent increase in Spanish-speaking patient registrations over the last five years, a number that is projected to increase. The NCBH Service Excellence Department employs ten full-time healthcare Spanish interpreters to serve the Hispanic LEP patients...
who receive care at the medical center and its nearby off-campus clinics. NCBH recently posted a job opening for a healthcare Spanish interpreter and received nearly seventy applications from bilingual individuals, mainly from Forsyth County. However, only about 10 percent of the applicants had received formal interpreter training, either through Forsyth Technical Community College’s continuing education interpreting classes and/or Northwest Allied Health Education Center. As stated before, there are very few training programs for healthcare interpreters nationwide, and these only offer a certificate of completion rather than a full-fledged degree. In summary, language barriers present a formidable obstacle for healthcare delivery. The Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) of North Carolina has declared that healthcare interpreters are a critical piece of the plan to remove barriers for this vulnerable population in accessing proper healthcare. DHHS of North Carolina has also stated that cohesive and more in-depth interpreters’ training programs as well as an official certification process are the next steps for the expansion and consolidation of the healthcare interpreting profession.

In response to this situation, in 2009 four programs at two different academic levels were developed and introduced by a research team at Wake Forest University (WFU, Winston-Salem, NC) in collaboration with Davidson County Community College (DCCC, Lexington, NC). Part of the project was funded by a WIRED grant from the U.S. Department of Labor. This project covers a widespread spectrum of programs, including:

1. Development and implementation of a comprehensive graduate curriculum with three tracks:
   a. general interpreting and translation track
   b. teaching of interpreting track, aiming to train interpreting faculty so they can become proficient in teaching interpreting to students pursuing this career path
   c. intercultural services in healthcare, a specialized track focusing on medical settings, for managers of translators and interpreters

2. Development and implementation of a comprehensive curriculum leading to an associate degree, subsequently replicable across the region and across the country, for the training of Spanish-language medical interpreters.

Two sequences from this WFU project, Associate Degree and Master of Arts, are discussed in the following section.
Associate Degree in Healthcare Interpreting at Davidson County Community College, Lexington, NC

The healthcare interpreter curriculum prepares individuals to work in a medical or healthcare environment as entry-level bilingual professionals who will provide communicative access, and therefore access to care and services to those whose language of preference is not English. Course work includes an overview of the American healthcare system, basic understanding of human anatomy and physiology, development of vocabulary associated with medical care, and an understanding of the ethical issues that individuals working in the healthcare industry will encounter. Students who succeed in the course will also acquire skills related to cognitive processes associated with interpreting between English and a target language, the structure and character of non-English communities, and refinement of communicative skills. Graduates qualify for entry-level jobs as professional bilingual employees in the American healthcare systems in a range of settings. Individuals can choose from part-time, full-time, or self-employment/free-lance positions, or apply language skills to other areas related to human service.

MA in Interpreting and Translation at Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, NC

The MA degree in interpreting and translation is a professionally oriented and research-based program that prepares interpreters and translators to work in the growing language industry in a variety of fields—foreign affairs, media, business, law, and especially healthcare delivery. Core courses include Applied Interpreting Studies, Applied Translation Studies, Discourse Organization and Interpreting, Contrastive Spanish/English Grammar and Stylistics, Spanish Translation, Spanish-English Interpreting, Sociolinguistics and Dialectology, and Localization and Terminology. The elective courses include Language Use and Technology, Intercultural Communication, U.S. Heritage Speakers, and Bilingualism and Medical-Scientific Translation. In addition to the coursework an internship and an applied research project allow students to make a rigorous connection between practical experience in the workplace and their more theoretical experience in the classroom. This curriculum provides solid preparation both for graduates who will pursue a professional career as interpreters and/or translators and those who intend to pursue a doctorate in this field.

Challenges of these Programs

Both programs developed by the WFU research team (that included specialists in interpreting and translation, linguistics, psychology, communication, and medicine) were approved by their respective
accreditation bodies and are currently offered at both institutions. While many other academic institutions have made an effort to offer courses in interpreting over the last five years, few have been able to maintain those offerings. Three-year work at WFU on both curricula and their subsequent implementation revealed several challenges that shed light on possible obstacles to the advancement of interpreting in the educational system.

Designing a research-based curriculum that both assures academic rigor and takes market needs into consideration is part of the challenge. The main challenge, however, is the shortage of qualified faculty. Another factor that affects the viability of such programs is the difficulties of defining the requirements for admission, and finding tools to adequately assess students according to those requirements. Of special importance is the decision on GRE/MCAT/LSAT scores; the assessment of interpreting abilities; language proficiency; students’ background, major, professional, or nonprofessional experience, and their relevance to a career in interpreting. In addition, the successful design of an educational program for interpreters depends greatly on the students’ profile, local needs, and geographical location that would influence access to internship sites in a particular region.

Furthermore, from an administrative point of view, balancing budgets and making wise investments is an important consideration. State schools’ support has recently diminished due to budget restrictions. Revenue-driven private institutions may not be inclined to take on such a long-term venture. Sufficient and stable funding for several consecutive academic years may thus be necessary to ensure the programs’ sustainability. In general, college administrations are hesitant to invest in a field that, though promising, is still new in U.S. academia.

Closer cooperation between academia and practitioners is needed to ensure better definitions of levels of competency for each setting and each position, as well as remuneration adequate to the degree received. After careful examination, training, workshops, and seminars offered outside of academic institutions can be considered continuous education or preparation for admission to the programs instead of being perceived as a threat or looked down on due to their apparent lack of academic rigor or time constraints. Moreover, collaboration among the institutions that offer or intend to offer degrees in interpreting seems to be the next needed step for a more systematic and consistent approach in interpreting education. One possibility of making this cooperation feasible is to introduce mutual external evaluations of programs that could lead to the establishment of an accreditation body under the auspices of the American Translation and Interpreting Studies Association, a professional and academic research organization.

Another challenge to the professionalization of interpreting education is the lack of recognition of the complexity of interpreters’ role. The
understanding of what interpreters really do is limited due to market pressure or limited knowledge about recent investigation developments, and hence results in setting the bar too high or too low for different interpreting settings. In addition, in certain areas such as healthcare and social service settings the role of the interpreter surpasses the responsibilities of a language specialist. This means that interpreters are sometimes required to be cultural brokers and communication facilitators, which adds to the public confusion in regards to the scope of the educational programs.

As stated in my article in *The Encyclopedia of Applied Linguistics* (2013), interpreters’ activity—based on the professionalization continuum comparison table (Curnow and McGonigel) that compiles attributes, process, and power and market models—is moving into the final stages of professional development. In addition to identity and standardization, one of the final stages of the professionalization of interpreters is academization, which encompasses education and the body of research/academic journals. Better-structured curricula, developed not in a competitive environment but rather in a more collaborative, complementary, and mutually supportive one in which research and implementation experiences are shared, would further contribute to that process.

**Awareness Factors as the Foundation for Academization**

In his revised *Basic Concepts and Models for Interpreter and Translator Training*, Gile argues that

in interpreting, when all parties are aware of the communication situation, including possible difficulties associated with the inter-lingual and sometimes intercultural transfer, assuming that generally the principles wish to communicate, more cooperation can be expected from them than in translation. (28)

Gile refers to the fact that the cooperation of listeners and speakers is more likely and that the interpreting event is thus more inclusive because “speakers may try to speak/sign more slowly, choose certain terms and structures and avoid others, and clarify terms and concepts that they would not otherwise bother to explain” (28). The awareness factor could be the dominant guiding principle for the standardization of interpreting education at all levels since it can be understood in several dimensions.

For example, Corsellis points out the importance of the awareness of a variety of situations. In discussing understanding the working context of public service, she states:
There is much to be learnt about working as an interpreter in the public services which is rarely taught in the classroom, and, in hindsight, is just common sense. [...] Students should be made aware of the fact that their assignments will be very diverse and that these assignments will require them to be alert to and find proper responses to a great variety of situations. (“Training Interpreters” 159)

Angelelli in “Designing Curriculum for Health Care Interpreting Education: A Principles Approach,” discusses the power of the interpreter with regard to the co-construction of the interpreting event, underlining awareness of the role and the effects of the interpreter’s behavior on the event. She states that “in many cases, interpreters are not even aware of the agency they possess, nor are they always conscious of the consequences of exercising it” (151).

Chesterman emphasizes awareness of causes and consequences. In a way this is an extension of what Angelelli has suggested—becoming aware of the agency of the interpreter. Chesterman calls it the “causal model,” claiming that this model offers the best way of relating different aspects of theory to each other and to practice. As he states, “The emancipatory translation is that trainees are of course taught translation norms but they themselves are responsible for deciding how they will react to these norms” (202). The causal model highlights the fact that translations do indeed have consequences, and also has an ethical side. Again, according to Chesterman, “norm-breaking has certain effects that may be surprisingly beneficial, if a new and better norm is introduced” (202).

Cronin highlights awareness of being an intellectual in society (“Deschooling Translation” 263). He advocates prominence (self-promotion) not only as a professional but also as a thinker, as an educated individual; suggesting translators’ expertise should be used to engage in debates on the cultural, political, and educational choices of societies. This awareness could serve to remind interpreters of the power that they hold, their responsibilities, and also the vital risks that vary depending on the interpreting setting.

These awareness aspects could assist in guiding the initiatives for a more consistent, structured, and sequential education of interpreters, as well as the education of the users of interpreting services. So many misconceptions and misunderstandings about interpreting prevail in the public sphere that not only interpreters but also businesses and institutions that employ interpreters should be educated in a systematic and organized manner. However, this aspect of education, falling outside of regular academic programs, needs to be treated in a separate paper.

While some European researchers recommend starting conference and community interpreting education at the graduate level or at least undergraduate level (Sawyer; Corsellis, Public Service Interpreting; Gile),
the current situation in the United States does not appear evolving in that direction. With several universities offering a bachelor degree in ASL interpreting and only one in interpreting in Spanish-English as of 2012 (University of Texas – Brownsville and Texas Southmost College) and few MA programs, there is a need for a more comprehensive, inclusive, and broader approach. Based on my observations in this paper regarding the curriculum design, admissions requirements and programs’ sequencing, I feel that programs at all levels, from an associate degree to a doctorate, should be supported by academic educators and the professional interpreting community. In certain areas, curricula at all these educational levels should address similar topics but at different levels of depth, and in others course offerings will depend on the learning outcomes and specific settings intended in each case. As was described above, graduates with an associate degree in North Carolina aim to work as entry-level interpreters only in medical settings, while the MA degree prepares advanced interpreters to work in various areas including healthcare but also the military, diplomatic work, and business. Other similarities in these two programs across the educational levels may include final assessment strategies where the difference would be in the complexity or the length of the final exams, and in internship placements. It seems that the most differentiating factors in these two programs are admission requirements and the degree of independent research activities included in the curriculum.

In conclusion, the first step toward the academization of interpreting is taking place as the blooming training programs confirm what investigators such as Angelelli, Corsellis, Gile have been defining. These programs testify to the fact that a non-prepared bilingual person cannot meet the growing demands of various professional settings where interpreting encounters take place in the United States. Each of the emerging programs in interpreting education responds to a very specific cross-cultural need, and therefore should be acknowledged, commended, and supported as an initial pillar of a much-needed structuralized interpreting education. The next step appears to be programs such as those designed in North Carolina in a sequential and complementary manner. These programs attempt to systematize the seemingly disjointed or redundant types of interpreting programs and to provide continuity to those students who start at the first level and intend to further develop and improve their professional interpreting abilities. They also demonstrate that the degree of specialization and expertise that affects the quality and professional delivery of interpreting depends on the level and type of education achieved by the interpreter. Finally, this comprehensive structure that has been successfully implemented in North Carolina encourages a complementary rather than competitive coexistence of various educational and training interpreting programs in the United States.
WORKS CITED


