



Universities and Interpreter Certification

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Abstract: Interpreter certification is a relatively recent trend in the interpreting profession, but it is rapidly gaining favor as a mechanism for guaranteeing quality for the users of interpreting services. This article begins with a definition of terms and a brief discussion of the history of interpreter certification in different countries. Then it analyzes the thorny issues that have arisen as different certification programs have developed, most particularly the contrast between high expectations and the lack of training for prospective interpreters. The roles that academic and government institutions have played in the process will be discussed, and recommendations will be made for improving certification procedures, with particular emphasis on the contributions that universities can make in terms of curricular development and research.

Keywords: interpreting, certification, assessment, testing, training

1. Introduction

Interpreter certification is a relatively recent trend in the translation and interpretation profession, but it is rapidly gaining favor as a mechanism for guaranteeing quality for the users of interpreting services. This article begins with a definition of terms and a brief discussion of the history of interpreter certification in different countries. Then it analyzes the thorny issues that have arisen as different certification programs have developed, most particularly the contrast between high expectations and the lack of training for prospective interpreters. It discusses the roles that academic and government institutions have played in the process, and makes recommendations for improving certification procedures, with particular emphasis on the contributions that universities can make in terms of curricular development and research.

2. Definition of Terms

As the practice of interpreting has become more professionalized in recent years, there has been an increasing demand for a credentialing process that will set standards of competence and ensure clients of quality services. Although the term *certification* has usually been chosen to describe this process throughout the United States and Canada, there has been some inconsistency and confusion about terminology. According to Stejskal (as cited in Chan, 2008, p. 48), there is a lack of standardization in credentialing terms, but generally organizations are *accredited* and individuals are *certified*. *Licensure* is an alternative term for the credentialing of individuals, but it normally refers to an authorization granted by a government agency to an individual who has met certain standards so that he or she may engage in an occupation for a fixed period of time. When licensing exists, it tends to be

a legal requirement for practicing a profession, such that those not licensed are barred from using the title or providing services. Certification, on the other hand, tends to be a voluntary process, and it is often granted by a professional association or an academic institution based on demonstrated proficiency and other criteria such as years of experience. Certification may be granted for an indefinite period of time, but maintenance requirements such as continuing education may be imposed. *Certificates* are usually awarded after completion of a course of study and demonstration of mastery of the knowledge or skills imparted in the courses. Certificates do not tend to have time limits or maintenance requirements associated with them.

The National Council on Interpreting in Health Care (NCIHC) (n.d.) defines certification as a process by which a governmental, academic, or professional organization attests to or guarantees that an individual is qualified to provide a particular service. Certification calls for formal assessment, using an instrument that has been tested for validity and reliability, so that the certifying body can be confident that the individuals it certifies have the knowledge and skills needed to do the job. (See the section “What is certification?” in NCIHC n.d.)

Bancroft and Rubio-Fitzpatrick (2009) further divide certification into three subcategories: *government certification (licensure)*, *professional certification* (awarded by a professional interpreters association, as is the practice in Canada and Australia), and *program certification* (granted upon successful completion of training).

As noted above, however, there is a great deal of inconsistency in usage. For example, in the State of Texas, court interpreters are *licensed* (Texas Department of Licensing and Regulation, n.d.), whereas in the State of New Jersey court interpreters are *approved* or *registered*, depending on whether a test is available in their language combination (New Jersey Judiciary, n.d.). In Australia, interpreters in all settings are *accredited* (National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters, n.d.). Throughout this article, the term *certification* will be used as a generic label for the credentialing of interpreters. Because the vast majority of certification programs involve some sort of assessment in which the candidate is required to demonstrate mastery of the knowledge and skills required to interpret competently, proficiency testing is assumed to be an implicit component of certification as the term is used in this article.

3. Professionalization and Certification

Much has been written about the development of professions in general (e.g., Freidson 1988), and about the professionalization of interpreting (e.g., Tseng, 1992; Mikkelsen, 1996; Witter-Merithew & Johnson, 2004). Scholars agree that one of the hallmarks of a profession is an accepted body of knowledge that is imparted to aspirants through recognized academic programs adhering to a standard curriculum. Credentialing or certification, whereby mastery of the knowledge, skills, and abilities required to practice the profession is verified by an independent body, is inextricably linked to this formative education. The certification process serves “to protect the interests of the public by assuring that practitioners hold an agreed-upon level of knowledge and skill, and by filtering out those with substandard levels of knowledge and skill” (Witter-Merithew & Johnson, 2004, p. 28).

To be fair, not all authors consider certification to be an unqualified plus for professions. For example, Chan (2008) highlights the confusion that

can be caused when multiple designations are used for practitioners of a given profession, and he cites a number of authors who have analyzed the pros and cons of certification for different professions, depending on their stage of development (47, 188–89). Bell (2000) takes the analysis of the translating and interpreting professions further and distinguishes between a pseudo-professional, para-professional, and a proto-professional stage of advancement towards full professionalism (p. 147). Individuals who have not received formal training are unlikely to have the level of proficiency required to attain certification, as quickly becomes evident when attempts are made to impose standards through certification without first developing education programs (Bell, 1997; Roat, 2006; Kelly, 2007).

4. History of Certification

In the United States, the judiciary was the first sector of the interpreting profession to implement certification, with the Court Interpreters Act of 1978. This initiative arose out of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, and was driven primarily by advocates for linguistic minorities and legal professionals (Gonzalez, Vasquez, & Mikkelsen, 1991, pp. 39–40, 57–58). Unlike other efforts to impose standards on court interpreters that were taking shape in the 1970s, such as that of the State of California, the federal initiative drew on input from professional interpreters as well as judicial personnel and testing experts. Against the backdrop of court decisions and media reports of injustices caused by deficient interpreting, the lack of standard educational programs of study for interpreters, and a job analysis revealing the complexity of the tasks carried out by court interpreters, the decision was made to develop an extremely rigorous performance-based, criterion-referenced examination (Gonzalez, Vasquez, & Mikkelsen, 1991, pp. 523–25).

At about the same time, a parallel endeavor was underway to set standards for sign language interpreting in the United States, but in this case the impetus came from practitioners themselves under the auspices of their professional association, the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID). The RID certification program differed from the efforts involving spoken language interpreters in another important way, in that it tested general interpreting skills rather than those limited to a specific setting such as the judiciary (Kelly, 2007). The issue of generalist versus specialist certification will be discussed later in this article.

In other parts of the world in the 1970s, the interpreting profession was also undergoing a standard-setting process as the market for interpreting services expanded beyond traditional international diplomatic or conference interpreting (for which standards were set by the international entities that hired interpreters and the universities that trained them) into minority, immigrant, and refugee communities. Sweden was one of the first countries to establish a system for authorizing interpreters based on proficiency testing (Niska, 2007; Idh, 2007). Other European countries that were experiencing waves of immigration and beginning to recognize the rights of linguistic minorities introduced similar programs (Corsellis, Cambridge, Glegg, & Robson, 2007), and Australia and Canada were undertaking similar endeavors (Bell, 1997; Roberts, 1997). As of this writing, certification of interpreters is a fairly common practice in most advanced countries, though there is a great deal of variety in the methods used for assessing proficiency.

5. Challenges

The wide range of solutions adopted in different countries for qualifying interpreters can be attributed to the multifaceted challenges posed by this complex profession. The most important issues that must be addressed when establishing a certification program are identified below.

5.1. Validity and reliability of assessment instruments.

To be considered *valid*, an assessment tool must test skills that are actually required to perform the task in question, and not test irrelevant skills; individuals who can do the job well should pass the test, and those who cannot do so should fail it (for a concise explanation of different types of validity, see Roat, 2006, pp. 8–9). A number of needs assessments and job analyses have identified the skill set that interpreters need in different settings (e.g., Gonzalez, Vasquez, & Mikkelsen, 1991; Hewitt, 1995; Roat, 2006), but how to measure competency in that skill set is not something on which there is universal agreement. For example, many interpreting exams include a written component, which is used as a relatively inexpensive means of screening out individuals who do not have a strong command of the formal registers of language and therefore are not likely to perform well on the more expensive oral component. At least one testing entity, however, determined that testing in simultaneous interpreting was more predictive of overall interpreting abilities than a written test (Hewitt, 1995). There is widespread agreement that candidates should demonstrate knowledge of ethical standards in order to be certified, but the multiple-choice, machine-scorable written exams that have been chosen by many testing entities as the most cost-effective way of testing that knowledge are not universally recognized as appropriate instruments for measuring that knowledge; the National Interpreter Certification instrument developed by the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) and the National Association of the Deaf (NAD), for example, uses an oral interview with open-ended questions to accomplish this task (Registry of Interpreters of the Deaf, n.d.).

According to Roat (2006), a *reliable* assessment instrument is one that “gives the same result for people of similar skill levels regardless of who administers the test, who rates the test, when the test is given or what version of the test is applied” (p. 9). Reliability is achieved through the proper training of test administrators and raters and adequate piloting of the assessment instrument, steps that are sometimes skipped by less qualified testing entities.

5.2. Conflicts of interest

Often private employers or interpreting agencies implement internal procedures to “certify” their interpreters as an assurance of quality to their clients. These programs should be viewed with caution, because some language service companies have been known to pass most or all candidates, regardless of their actual abilities, motivated by a desire to attract more clients by boasting of a large staff of “certified” interpreters. While a hospital or private agency may be more familiar with the demands of its working environment than an outside testing entity, the potential for bias outweighs any advantages that such intimate knowledge may offer. By the same token, schools that “certify” the graduates of their interpreter training programs have a vested interest in passing most or all candidates as a means of validating their own curriculum. Some testing programs even disqualify those who

teach interpreting from serving as test raters because of the perceived conflict of interest (P. Kilroe, personal communication, October 23, 2009). The most credible testing entities have no conflict of interest and evaluate candidate strictly according to objective criteria (Roat, 2006).

5.3. High failure rate due to lack of training

As noted above, interpreting has only recently begun to professionalize, and thus there are still few university degree programs available (in the United States, at least) to prepare candidates for certification exams. The oldest schools of interpreting are geared towards international conference interpreting, a field in which certification is rare, and they offer training in just a handful of languages (Roberts, 1997). To address the growing need for interpreters in a wide variety of languages in settings such as the courts, hospitals and social service agencies, short-term programs have been developed to provide a modicum of training in narrow domains (e.g., Hewitt, 1995; Penney & Sammons, 1997; Fiola, 2003; Straker & Watts, 2003; Roat, 2003). These programs are limited in scope and duration, and are often not language-specific. Consequently, only a small number of participants who come into the programs with already strong skills and aptitudes are able to pass certification exams upon completion of the training (Gonzalez, Vasquez, & Mikkelsen, 1991; California Court Interpreters Program, n.d.; Colorado Court Interpreter Program, n.d.). Sharp criticism of this low success rate has been voiced by court personnel grappling with the shortage of interpreters, unsuccessful test candidates, and others, and a lawsuit was even filed (Gonzalez, Vasquez, & Mikkelsen, 1991). Critics contend that the exams are unjustifiably difficult, that they test constructs not relevant to the work of interpreters, or that they are unfairly administered by incumbents hoping to exclude competitors; but in most cases the rigor of interpreter certification exams has not been relaxed (Gonzalez, Vasquez, & Mikkelsen, 1991).

5.4. Generalist versus specialist certification

In the United States, certification programs for spoken language interpreters tend to focus on a single setting, such as the judiciary or health care (Kelly, 2007). In contrast, in countries such as Sweden, the United Kingdom and Australia, credentialed interpreters are allowed to work in any public service setting (Bell, 1997; Corsellis, Cambridge, Glegg, & Robson, 1997; Idh, 2007). Sound arguments have been made for a generalist certification that would require proficiency in the knowledge, skills, and abilities that all interpreters must master, in addition to specialist certifications in whatever fields an individual interpreter wishes to pursue. For example, Kelly (2007) advocates consideration of “a generalist certification for *all* community and court interpreters,” pointing out that “the basic skills and requirements of interpreting are the same, regardless of industry” (p. 36).

It should also be noted that specialist certification could lead to the kind of confusion that Chan (2008) calls “signal jamming,” in that buyers of interpreting services receive mixed signals from providers about who is competent to offer which service, thereby increasing their mistrust, unduly complicating their efforts to solve a perceived problem, and thus reducing their incentive to seek out fully qualified professionals. Another disincentive identified by Chan is that practitioners who attain the minimum level of competence to earn some sort of certification may stop there and never improve their proficiency enough to move up the ladder to higher levels of professionalism (2008, p. 213).

5.5. Multiplicity of languages

Globalization and migration have vastly expanded the need for interpreting services and the number of languages in which such services are provided. In light of the complex factors involved in developing reliable interpreter assessment instruments, it is extremely difficult to impose uniform standards for the disparate languages (and the associated cultures) in which certification testing is required. Just to cite one example, the State of New Jersey tests court interpreter candidates in Arabic (Modern Standard, Egyptian Colloquial, Levantine), Bosnian, Cantonese, Croatian, French, German, Haitian Creole, Hmong, Italian, Korean, Laotian, Mandarin, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Serbian, Somali, Spanish, Turkish, and Vietnamese (New Jersey Judiciary, 2008). Not only is it difficult to set quality standards for such a vast array of languages, it is also extremely challenging to find subject-matter experts for test development and language-specific trainers for prospective interpreters in languages of limited diffusion (LLDs). Developing language-specific certification exams is an expensive process, and testing entities are likely to charge high fees from examinees (California Court Interpreters Program, n.d.).

5.6. Lack of enforcement and market disorder

From the individual interpreter's perspective, a more practical problem arises with respect to certification, namely, the time and expense involved in pursuing training (whether in a formal course or through self-study) and passing certification exams. This investment might be justified if there were assurances of gainful employment at the end of the process. However, most interpreters are independent contractors and have no guarantee of steady work. Even in jurisdictions where certification of court interpreters is required by law and is strictly enforced, there are loopholes that allow judges to use non-certified interpreters under exigent circumstances (e.g., Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industry, n.d.). Compounding the problem is the fact that even when certification is required by law, enforcement may be lax and many clients will opt for the lowest bidder, regardless of qualifications. The Internet abounds with discussions among interpreters about such practices (e.g., Marton, 2006).

In view of the high cost of entering the profession through legitimate channels (i.e., by pursuing an academic degree and/or certification) and the downward pressure on fees that can be charged on the market, interpreters have little incentive to participate in certification programs. Witter-Merithew and Johnson, among others, have characterized this phenomenon as "market disorder," defined as the current state of the interpreting market that reflects significant instability related to minimum standards for entry into the field and a lack of consistent and reliable professional control over the variables impacting the effective delivery of interpreting services (e.g., induction into the field, working conditions, job descriptions, role and responsibility, wages) (2004, p. 20).

6. Proposed Solutions

What can the different stakeholders do to address these difficult challenges? In the interest of bringing together the government, education, and commercial sectors, recommendations for each of these will be made, but particular emphasis will be placed on academic institutions and the

contributions they can make to the profession. Collaboration among all stakeholders is essential, as noted by Chan (2008) with respect to the translating profession:

[T]here is a need for professional translator associations, translator-training institutions and other stakeholders to work together in developing multilateral signaling devices that can meet the demands of employers and clients, as well as provide professional translators with the required knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary for them to survive and thrive in the complex and ever-changing translation market. (p.217)

Chan's (2008) study of information economics as applied to the translating profession is fully applicable to the interpreting profession as well. The hierarchy of international collaboration for educational institutions to promote certification that Van Damme proposed (as cited in Chan, 2008, p. 195) is also relevant to interpreting, and as Chan points out, it can be used for collaboration among professional associations as well.

As for government agencies, the main thing they can do to support the interpreting profession is to enforce existing laws and regulations requiring the use of certified interpreters. Public sector entities (healthcare institutions, law enforcement agencies, school districts, court systems, etc.) that contract out for interpreting services should heed guidelines such as Executive Order No. 13166: *Improving Access to Services for Persons with Limited English Proficiency* (65 Fed. Reg. 50121-50122 [August 16, 2000]) and issue solicitations that contain reasonable provisions for obtaining professional interpreting services and award contracts to the most qualified (not necessarily the lowest) bidders. Those that hire staff interpreters should establish high standards and pay commensurate salaries. If they have internal interpreting proficiency exams or contract with testing entities for such exams, they should adhere to recognized psychometric norms. Another important way in which government can enhance the level of professionalism among interpreters is by funding educational programs at community colleges and state universities.

Private industry (for-profit interpreting agencies, call centers, insurance companies, financial institutions, companies with predominantly immigrant workforces, etc.) should acknowledge the importance and complexity of interpreting services by hiring qualified professionals with academic degrees or certification and paying them appropriate fees or salaries. Large companies that make extensive use of interpreting services should help maintain the pool of skilled practitioners by funding scholarships and sponsoring events organized by professional associations or interpreting schools. They can also fund research projects that will serve to deepen our understanding of the interpreting process, improve teaching methodologies and identify best practices. As with government agencies, if companies in the private sector require interpreting proficiency exams, they should conduct them in an impartial manner by contracting with reputable testing entities that uphold recognized psychometric standards. The testing entities themselves, which also tend to be for-profit businesses, should engage professional interpreters and qualified academic experts to develop appropriate assessment instruments.

Interpreters associations can address the challenges identified here and raise the profile of the profession in a number of ways. For example, they can engage in school outreach projects to encourage youngsters to strengthen

their language skills with a view to pursuing careers in the field. They can act as a gateway to the profession, rather than a barrier, by mentoring student interpreters, offering educational opportunities for prospective interpreters, and collaborating with interpreting schools. They can also open channels of communication with public and private employers of interpreters, testing entities, and academic institutions to ensure that the issues confronted by practitioners in their day-to-day work are accurately reflected in industry standards and curricular materials, and that their members are kept abreast of the latest developments and research in the field. Chan suggests a number of ways in which professional associations can coordinate with certifying bodies to enhance the profession's status in the market (referring, in this case, to the translating profession, but the same can be said for interpreters) (2008, pp. 192–93).

7. Universities

Institutions of higher learning are in a position to contribute a great deal to the professionalization of interpreting in ways that will advance their own agendas as well. First and foremost, colleges and universities should prepare future professionals by giving them a solid foundation in language proficiency and world knowledge. Expanding course offerings in LLDs, which are often heritage languages of their student populations, can strengthen ties with local communities and open up new opportunities for non-traditional students such as refugees whose formal education was interrupted when they left their countries of origin. Academic institutions that are concerned about keeping their curricula relevant to the demands of the current job market and attracting talented students with high aspirations for remunerative occupations should recognize that interpreting is a growth industry that offers attractive career prospects (according to Kelly, Stewart, & Hedge (2010), the global language services industry is worth US\$26.327 billion as of 2010).

To find qualified faculty for degree programs in interpreting, especially in LLDs, universities may need to be flexible in hiring procedures and offer opportunities to experienced practitioners who show an aptitude for teaching but do not have the advanced degrees that are normally required for teaching at that level. As more and more institutions offer graduate degrees in interpreting and related fields, the pool of potential faculty members who meet the traditional requirements will grow and exceptions will no longer be necessary.

Universities that train professionals who are likely to work with interpreters, such as physicians, lawyers, and journalists, can collaborate with interpreting programs to offer coursework and experience to their students in the form of internships and community projects involving linguistic minority populations with whom they communicate through interpreters. By formalizing the language assistance offered in teaching hospitals, legal clinics, and other public services, universities can enhance the marketability of their graduates and establish strong bonds with surrounding communities.

Academic institutions need to collaborate actively with prospective employers of interpreters in the public and private sectors and with professional associations to ensure that the instruction they provide to their students meets current needs, particularly with respect to continuing professional development. This collaboration can also yield benefits to the educational institutions by serving as a vehicle to recruit working

professionals who wish to pursue advanced degrees. There is sometimes a disconnect between the theoretical foundation provided in interpreter education programs and the actual demands of the jobs their graduates will perform, in that issues such as client relations and business practices are often ignored. Not all programs encourage their students to join professional associations or attain specialized certifications beyond their academic degree, reasoning that the degree itself should be a sufficient credential. Whether or not graduates of training programs should be required to take additional tests to prove their qualifications is a legitimate issue that should be discussed openly by all stakeholders, and some sort of validation of academic achievement should be considered. In Australia, for example, the National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (NAATI) (2009) recognizes qualified schools of interpreting by automatically granting accreditation¹ to their graduates.

And finally, a vitally important contribution that universities can make to the interpreting profession is research. Many questions about the practice of interpreting could be answered by conducting empirical studies or expanding further on research that has already been done. Here are just a few:

- What traits and qualities of candidates for admission to schools of interpreting are the best predictors of success?
- How do the needs of heritage speakers differ from those of students who acquired second languages in school, and how can educational institutions address their particular needs?
- What cognitive operations are involved in interpreting?
- What physiological, psychological, or neurological factors diminish or enhance interpreting performance?
- What are the best methods for teaching the techniques of consecutive interpreting, simultaneous interpreting, and sight translation?
- What are the most effective ways of teaching interpreter ethics?
- In view of the distribution of the different modes of interpreting in actual practice in various settings, are the modes weighted appropriately in interpreting proficiency exams?
- What are the most appropriate tools for measuring the knowledge, skills and abilities required for interpreting? Are performance exams the only effective way to determine interpreters' competence?
- How can analysis tools such as information economics be applied to the interpreting market to identify the most effective approaches for expanding employment opportunities for professional interpreters?
- Given the small number of qualified practitioners in LLDs, how can technology be leveraged to meet the growing need for interpreting services in those languages through efficient management of scarce resources?

8. Conclusion

The last two decades have seen tremendous growth in research on many different aspects of interpreting, including the issues raised here. Each study has answered some questions while raising a whole host of new questions and

¹ In Australia the term *accreditation* is used to refer to the same concept for which *certification* is used in most other Anglophone countries.

opening up avenues for further inquiry. The key is to continue challenging basic assumptions about interpreter training, testing, and best practices, and only through a collaborative effort involving government, private industry, professional associations, and academic institutions can we explore all facets of this complex activity.

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