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Training refugees to become interpreters for refugees

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Summary: The Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT), in partnership with the Victorian Multicultural Commission (VMC), has, since 2002, been offering a Diploma of Interpreting program in rare and emerging languages which has been approved by the Australian National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (NAATI). In addition to the usual challenges of initiating programs in relatively new languages – such as recruiting teaching staff and developing bilingual teaching materials – the training in these languages presented some unique challenges which required modified and/or alternative approaches. This paper will outline the structure of the Diploma program given in 2008 in two language streams, Burmese and Swahili (Kiswahili), and present the findings of a research case study which investigated both the academic and the professional reactions from both staff and students. The findings of this study have implications for the provision of interpreter training programs in rare and emerging languages. There are also implications for both teachers and students in the area of cross-cultural communication.

Keywords: refugee; interpreter; training course; new and emerging languages; NAATI; VMC

1. Introduction

Australia is a country of migrants and has been since British colonisation in 1788. Migrants and their offspring have played an important role in forming Australia's rich tapestry of multiple cultures and peoples, and are an integral part of Australian history. An important component of migration to this country in the post-war period has been the resettlement of refugees from various parts of the world. According to the 2006 data compiled by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (see Table 1 below), Australia accepted the second highest number of refugees out of all the countries in the world, second only to the United States of America.

Table 1: Main countries for resettlement of refugees in 2006

Country	Number	Country	Number
1. USA	41,300	8. Denmark	530
2. Australia	13,400	9. Netherlands	500
3. Canada	10,700	10. UK	380
4. Sweden	2,400	11. Ireland	200
5. Norway	1,000	12. Brazil	50
6. New Zealand	700	13. Chile	40
7. Finland	550	14. Mexico	10

Source: Governments / UNHCR (http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/protect?id=3b8366bc4)

The newly arrived migrants require many resettlement services relating to such essential needs as housing, education and health. Many of them also

receive counselling services for problems relating to past exposure to violence, torture and other trauma. In any interaction with the public service agencies in Australia, they inevitably need language services for communication. This assistance is sometimes provided by the bilingual staff members of providers or by way of multilingual publications. In many cases, however, interpreters are engaged by service providers in face-to-face or phone contact.

The Victorian State government undertook a number of initiatives to increase the supply of trained interpreters, especially in the so-called rare and emerging languages. Of particular significance in this regard is the Victorian Multicultural Commission (VMC), which was originally set up in 1983 as the Victorian Ethnic Affairs Commission and which provides advice to the Victorian Government on the development of legislative and policy frameworks as well as the delivery of migrant settlement related services. From 2002, the VMC has collaborated with RMIT University, offering scholarships to eligible entrants to the Diploma of Interpreting program in rare and emerging languages which trains interpreters for their respective communities, mostly comprising people from war-torn regions and countries.

2. RMIT diploma of interpreting in rare and emerging languages

In the past few years, the Australian humanitarian intake has shifted its focus from the Horn of Africa countries such as Somalia, Ethiopia, and Eritrea to Burma and the war zone areas of Sudan, Iraq and Afghanistan (Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2008). In line with changing humanitarian and refugee intake patterns and the consequent emerging demand for interpreters in the new community languages, the RMIT Diploma of Interpreting program has delivered courses in a total of 11 rare and emerging languages since 2002 (Table 2).

Table 2: Languages delivered in RMIT diploma of interpreting since 2002

Year	Languages
2008	Burmese, Swahili
2007	Amharic, Nuer
2006	Dari, Sudanese Arabic*, Tigrinya
2005	Dari, Dinka, Oromo
2004	Amharic, Timorese Hakka
2003	Dari, Khmer
2002	Khmer

**Sudanese Arabic is not a NAATI accredited language stream. Students who achieved accreditation levels were accredited by NAATI in standard Arabic. A special additional test was given to students in Sudanese Arabic and successful students were given a certificate acknowledging their proficiency in Sudanese Arabic.*

The program is approved by the Australian National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (NAATI) and the VMC provides scholarships to eligible entrants to the program to help with their tuition fees, transport expenses, books and materials, and the NAATI accreditation fees of the successful graduates.

2.1 NAATI and NAATI approved courses

NAATI is a national standards body partly funded by the Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments of Australia (NAATI, 2008). It was established in 1977 and since then has been conducting a large accreditation

testing program, which offered tests in fifty-eight languages in 2008. It also approves university and TAFE (Technical and Further Education) programs that lead to NAATI accreditation. Martin (1996), Bell (1997) and Campbell and Hale (2003) have elaborated on the details of the origin of NAATI, its approved courses and how they operate within the NAATI system. Like a number of other universities and TAFE providers in Australia, RMIT University offers NAATI approved translating and interpreting programs, and testing is carried out in accordance with the same guidelines that NAATI applies in its own accreditation tests (Campbell and Hale, 2003). On completion of their studies at RMIT in the Diploma of Interpreting program, students sit a final interpreting test. Successful students are then recommended to NAATI for accreditation. Candidates sitting NAATI exams, either through public exams held by NAATI or by individually approved courses, need to achieve 70% in order to receive professional accreditation.

There are two levels of NAATI interpreter accreditation: Interpreter (formerly known as Level 3 Interpreter) and Paraprofessional Interpreter (formerly known as Level 2 Interpreter). For those languages that NAATI does not test at paraprofessional or professional level, it offers 'Recognition' upon demonstration of evidence of English proficiency, the provision of two referee reports and completion of a short training course in interpreting.

2.2 Program structure

The RMIT Diploma of Interpreting in rare and emerging languages comprises 240 face-to-face contact hours, which are delivered in part-time mode over two semesters. Students are required to attend eight hours of classes on two week nights. The Diploma program at RMIT has adopted a national curriculum devised and owned by the Western Australian Central TAFE. It consists of six competencies listed in Table 3. The corresponding subject titles of the competencies are provided in the same table. For easy reference and clarity, this paper will refer to the subject titles rather than the titles of the competencies.

Half of the contact hours, i.e. 120 hours, are allocated to the subject entitled 'Interpreting Skills and Practice', which focuses on the training of interpreting techniques and transfer skills. This subject is delivered by the LOTE (Language Other Than English) interpreting teacher, in partnership with an experienced English teacher, who normally teaches the subject entitled 'English for Interpreters'. The bilingual interpreting teaching staff are normally either currently practising interpreters or suitably qualified bilingual teachers if no practising interpreters are available. Each of the four remaining subjects involves thirty contact hours. 'Contextual Studies' is taught in both English and LOTE and covers essential background knowledge in the common domains such as medical, legal, social welfare and community services in which these interpreters often work. 'English for Interpreters' is an English language support subject aimed at developing communicative oral skills in English for interpreting situations. 'Ethics and Professional Aspects' involves the study of the concepts of code of conduct and ethical behaviour for interpreters.

The Diploma of Interpreting program at RMIT University conducts an intake test to assess levels of bilingual proficiency. Successful students are eligible to receive the VMC scholarship to assist their studies. Languages offered each year are recommended and endorsed by the Program Advisory Committee, comprised of the RMIT Translating and Interpreting core staff, industry stakeholders, practitioner representatives and VMC. Due to the constraints of staff resources and available State Government TAFE funding, usually only two rare and emerging languages are delivered each year.

Table 3: Diploma of interpreting curriculum structure

Competency Title	Corresponding Subject Title	Hours / week	No of Weeks	Total Hours
1. Interpret Dialogues 2. Simultaneously Interpret Dialogues, Speeches and Presentations ***	Interpreting Skills and Practice	4 hrs	30	120 hrs
3. Integrate Bi-cultural Aspects in the Behaviour and Communication (English) * (LOTE)**	Contextual Studies (English) *	2 hrs	15	30 hrs
	Contextual Studies (LOTE) **	2 hrs	15	30 hrs
4. Communicate Effectively with Professionals, Clients, Colleagues and Others *	English for Interpreters *	2 hrs	15	30 hrs
5. Maintain Effective Management Practices **	Ethics and Professional Aspects **	2 hrs	15	30 hrs
6. Maintain On-going Professional Development and Personal Development **				
Total No of Hours				**240 hrs**

** Delivered in semester 1 only.*
*** Delivered in semester 2 only.*
**** Competency only applicable to Auslan*

Students must achieve a minimum of 50% for each subject and a Distinction (70% plus) in 'Interpreting Skills and Practice' to be eligible to graduate and be recommended to NAATI for Paraprofessional Interpreter Accreditation.

2.3 RMIT pathways for diploma of interpreting graduates

RMIT is one of the five dual sector universities in Australia, operating in both the Higher Education and TAFE sectors. Two RMIT internal pathways are available to graduates of the Diploma program. The first is within the TAFE sector, enabling students to enter the Advanced Diploma of Translating and Interpreting which is a NAATI approved program offering professional level of accreditation. Since 2003 the Advanced Diploma of Translating and Interpreting has delivered streams in the rare and emerging languages including Khmer (2003), Somali (2004), and Arabic (from 2002 to present) on a part-time basis over four semesters.

The second pathway is via the higher education sector where two options are available. RMIT Advanced Diploma of Translating and Interpreting graduates are eligible for up to one semester of credit towards an RMIT Master's degree in Social Science (Translating and Interpreting Studies). There are also existing arrangements with the RMIT Bachelor of Social Science (International Studies) program, whereby Diploma of Interpreting

graduates are eligible for up to 1.5 semester credits and Advanced Diploma graduates for up to 1.5 year credits in a three-year undergraduate degree program.

3. Case study: RMIT diploma of interpreting in Swahili and Burmese delivered in 2008

The aim of the case study was to provide an insight into the background of the students and appraise feedback on aspects of the program from the students and teachers, therefore providing a basis for ongoing course and professional development. The case study was conducted with students and staff in the Burmese and Swahili language streams offered in 2008 for the first time in the Diploma of Interpreting program. The VMC provided scholarships to all students who successfully passed the intake test. This test included an assessment of reading comprehension and short essay writing on a currently relevant topic in both English and LOTE, as well as a brief interview in both languages. Sixteen students were selected for the Burmese group from approximately twenty-five applicants, and thirteen for the Swahili group from approximately twenty applicants.

Data was collected from a survey of teachers involved in teaching these two groups, and, a separate survey of students enrolled in the Burmese and Swahili streams of the program in semesters 1 and 2, 2008. The teacher survey sought information on aspects of teaching methodologies specific to the needs of these groups and appraisal by the teachers of the students' learning outcomes.

The student questionnaires sought information in three main areas. The first area included personal information, including age, visa category, period of residence in Australia, education qualifications and language ability. The second related to interpreting experience; the perception of interpreting need in the respondent's community and the relationship of the respondents with the local community. The third area included feedback on course administration and delivery, particularly with regard to teaching and resources. All questions in areas two and three in the student survey were open-ended and provided for written replies in the respondent's own time. This allowed for a range of opinions and descriptions to be expressed by the respondents without interference of the researchers.

The anonymous survey questionnaires were handed out in hard copies to relevant teachers and students in August 2008 together with an approved Plain Language Statement. Completion and submission of the questionnaires were voluntary. Four teachers (two LOTE interpreting teachers and two English teachers), eleven Burmese and seven Swahili students returned the questionnaires. The survey findings and discussions will be presented in the following sections of this paper.

3.1 Teacher profile

A total of four teachers were surveyed for the purposes of this study. Two English native speakers were involved in teaching the 'English for Interpreters' subject and also as team teachers in the subject 'Interpreting Skills and Practice'. Both were experienced TESOL teachers. The LOTE teachers were native speakers of Burmese and Swahili, who taught the 'Interpreting Skills and Practice' and 'Contextual Studies (LOTE)' subjects. The program coordinator taught 'Contextual Studies (English)' and 'Ethics and Professional Aspects'. All native English teachers had extensive experience in teaching other language groups of the Diploma program. However the two LOTE teachers had not had previous experience in teaching

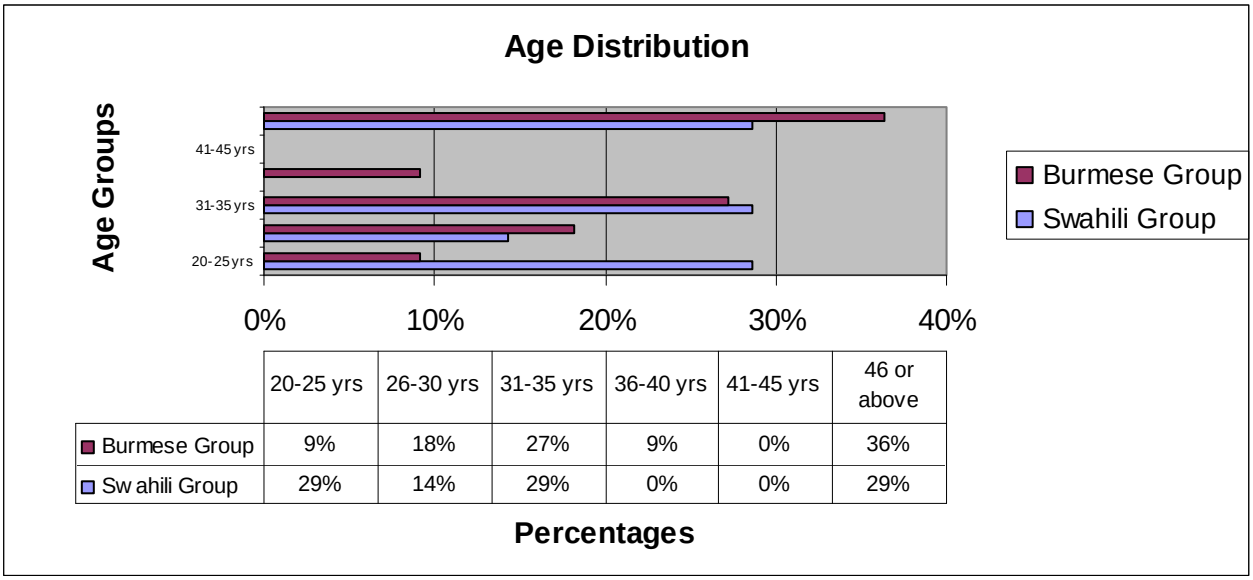
within an interpreter training program, though they both had experience in teaching in other contexts and possessed tertiary educational qualifications.

3.2 Student profile

Eleven Burmese and seven Swahili students, representing 69% and 54% of their respective group, completed the questionnaire. The profile of these students can be summarised as follows:

As shown in Table 4 which represents the age distribution of the students, the Burmese group had the highest numbers of students in the 31-35 (27%) and 46 plus (36%) age groups, whereas the Swahili groups were evenly spread among the 20-25 (29%), 31-35 (29%) and 46 plus (29%) age groups.

Table 4



	20-25 yrs	26-30 yrs	31-35 yrs	36-40 yrs	41-45 yrs	46 or above
Burmese Group	9%	18%	27%	9%	0%	36%
Swahili Group	29%	14%	29%	0%	0%	29%

The majority of students in both language groups were from refugee backgrounds. 82% and 86% of the Burmese and Swahili groups respectively had arrived in Australia under humanitarian programs. Both groups of students were relatively new to Australia. 63% of the Burmese respondents and 86% of the Swahili respondents had only been in Australia for less than five years. However, there were differences between the groups with regard to levels of education. 82% of the Burmese respondents held a bachelor's degree or above, whereas 43% of the Swahili respondents had been university educated. This generally accords with the profile of the overall humanities intake in Australia which indicates that those from African backgrounds have completed less schooling than those from Middle Eastern and Asian backgrounds (REPP, 2007).

An unusual, and probably the most interesting feature of these students' linguistic capacity was revealed in the survey (Table 5). Most of these students were multilingual, which contrasted with the commonly bilingual background of students in the other more mainstream community languages offered at RMIT University (i.e. Arabic, Chinese, Greek, Indonesian, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Spanish and Turkish). Table 5 indicates that Burmese is the first language of less than 30% of the Burmese respondents and the second language of the majority (73%) of the respondents. In the case of the Swahili group, a higher percentage (57%) of the respondents speak Swahili as their first language, and interestingly 43% speak French as their second

language. English is the second language of less than 20% of the Burmese respondents and less than 30% of the Swahili respondents. Similar percentages of the Burmese (55%) and Swahili (57%) respondents list English as their third language.

Table 5

BURMESE GROUP (total 11 respondents)	
First Language	Karen (4), Burmese (3), Chin (2), Kerreni (1), Zomi (1)
Second Language	Burmese (8), English (2), Thai (1)
Third Language	English (6), Karen (2), Thai (1)
SWAHILI GROUP (total 7 respondents)	
First Language	Swahili (4), Dinka (1), Kirundi (1), Sukuma (1)
Second Language	French (3), English (2), Swahili (2)
Third Language	English (4), Kakwa (1), Swahili (1), French (1)

90% of the Burmese respondents had interpreting experience before they joined the program, among which 45% had done paid interpreting work and 45% unpaid or volunteer work. All of the Swahili respondents had interpreting experience before they joined the program, with the majority (71%) having done paid interpreting work.

This data underscores the stated differences between the groups relating to the reasons for studying interpreting. The responses of the Burmese group were predominantly related to helping the community by offering their interpreting skills. However, the Swahili group saw the program as an opportunity to obtain professional employment or as a pathway for further study. Nevertheless, a large number of the respondents from both language groups were already participating actively in their communities and many played significant roles in various community-based organisations such as leaders of their ethnic committees, organisers of religious groups and coordinators of youth activities.

3.3 Course appraisal

3.3.1 Teacher feedback. The questionnaire for teachers was designed to collect feedback on three areas: the curriculum, resources and classroom dynamics. All teachers commented that the students in these language streams were highly motivated, well-focused and very polite. They agreed that the English language proficiency of the students varied greatly as some of the younger students had had disrupted education leading to difficulties in literacy in both languages compared to their multilingual oral skills. The literature (e.g. Rutter, 1994; Francis, 2004) also suggests that also suggests that because of the disruption due to movement within and between countries, literacy skills are not consolidated in any one language. Added to that, these particular students are characterised by strong oral traditions and the other language skills are not highly developed, particularly among younger students. They have relatively advanced oral skills and are comfortable with spoken messages. However some with lower literacy skills appeared to have faced more challenges compared to their peers who are more proficient in reading. This might have implications for the conduct of intake tests in the future. Owing to the diverse needs in English of these students, one of the English teachers suggested many would benefit from a preparatory course in oral and written English, because “the communities that need interpreting services the most often have a large pool of aspiring bilingual people who would love to become interpreters but lack more solid English skills.”

The LOTE teachers also commented on various levels of deficiency in the students' LOTE. This problem was related to the fact that in many cases the language that they were interpreting into was not the students' native language, which impacted on their performance in the program. Very often there was a marked difference between their oral and written language skills. One of the teachers also commented that these students are often part of groups with wide age spread, which resulted in extreme diversity in skill levels and importantly, attitudes to social issues which arise during the course of teaching, such as women's issues and domestic violence.

One of the English teachers who was involved in team teaching with the LOTE teachers commented that working with teachers who had been exposed to working in the Australian education system helped enormously as they were aware of ethical and professional expectations. She said "if LOTE teachers don't have Australian experience, then coaching and guiding the LOTE teachers takes a lot of time."

Ethnic issues and political divides within certain language groups as well as cultural differences were also reported as an issue, causing some concern for English teachers who delivered the team teaching sessions. The teachers reported experiences of tensions among students because they may be from different ethnic backgrounds, although sharing a common language. One teacher also reported the problem of correcting students' pronunciation. In some cases this was seen as a sensitive issue, where she reported that one of the students found being corrected in class "humiliating".

The LOTE teachers' comments were mostly concerned with the need for more bilingual resources such as dialogue books and audio resources in the specific language pairs given that the resources available in print or on the internet were limited. Problems reported by the teachers in this area included the timely provision of practice dialogues with LOTE sections of the English dialogues translated in order to facilitate classroom learning. The English teachers pointed out that many of the rare and emerging languages were in the process of developing a vocabulary to match Western cultural contexts. In many instances they had to explain what a word or concept meant in English and worked with the LOTE teacher to assist the students to work out how to express them in their LOTE. The teachers thought it would be helpful for students' learning if bilingual booklets or glossaries in these languages were developed in time for the delivery of a particular language program.

Two teachers reported that the students who were newcomers to the country found it difficult to cope with the study routines and processes and needed a great deal of assistance to fit into the Australian tertiary education context. They also reported observations about students' struggle to balance studies as well as family and work commitments, which was sometimes manifested in irregular attendance.

All teachers responded favourably to 'team teaching', where an English teacher and a LOTE teacher conduct a two-hour interpreting session together. They remarked that this was pedagogically effective, as students received immediate feedback about the subtleties of expression in both languages from native speakers, as well as having increased opportunities for vocabulary acquisition in both languages. It also provided a balanced approach to improving skills in the generally weaker aspect of interpreting from the LOTE to English.

3.3.2 Student feedback. Students generally responded favourably to all aspects of the program. Particular mention was made by the respondents of the need to develop and expand their contextual knowledge, and they also expressed the need for glossaries of specialised terminology in the relevant domains in which interpreters work. Seven respondents out of a total of

eighteen pointed out that the study of 'Ethics and Professional Aspects' for interpreters in the program was of great benefit to them. Eight respondents particularly liked the bilingual and bicultural issues to which the program exposes them, commenting that this would equip them with the necessary skills to perform competently as an interpreter after completing the program.

A number of the Swahili respondents commented on the need to be exposed to a broader range of regional Swahili variations, suggesting that "the LOTE teacher should include regional variations used by Congolese, Ugandan, Burundian and others, because not all refugees in Australia speak Tanzanian Swahili, which is the native tongue of the teacher."

The Swahili respondents further expressed a concern about the variation in which the final interpreting exam would be assessed, as the majority of the students believed they may be disadvantaged. A number of students suggested that the number of contact hours for this program be doubled in order to fully prepare them to work independently and competently after graduation.

More than 50% of the students expressed the need to have more printed and audio interpreting practice resources. A number of them wanted more practice and more instruction on lexical and syntactic aspects of the LOTE as well as vocabulary building. Significantly the majority of them were also of the opinion that the LOTE teacher could improve on organisation and general teaching techniques.

3.4 Discussion of findings

The recruitment of suitably qualified teachers is a challenge for any new course (Hale, 2007), but more so, the researchers believe, in the rare and emerging languages in the discipline of interpreting due to the small pool of suitable teaching candidates. It was particularly challenging in the case of Swahili due to its usage over vast areas of the southeast coast of Africa, resulting in the proliferation of dialects and localised syntactic and semantic variations. It was very difficult to find someone who was proficient in all varieties of Swahili. Furthermore, the need for more training and mentoring of the LOTE interpreting teacher was explicitly pointed out by the more experienced English teachers, confirming the challenges in this field. To this end, the translating and interpreting team at RMIT is currently planning to deliver professional development workshops of particular relevance to LOTE teachers and continues to look to both the university and the State Government for support to ensure that the highest possible quality of teaching is delivered.

The students were selected by means of an intake test described in the opening paragraph of section 3. However, the teacher feedback regarding the language proficiency of the students in both English and the LOTE leads us to rethink the efficacy of the current format of the intake test. The fact that most of the students had more advanced oral skills than reading/writing skills indicates that more precise diagnostic tools may have to be designed in order for the program to select students with better oral skills as well as sufficient reading/writing skills. This would need to be based on further research on assessment issues. The lack of research in the area of intake tests (entrance/aptitude tests) for the interpreting profession and the need to make more use of the developments in the educational measurement has been highlighted by Campbell and Hale (2003) in their comprehensive review of assessment issues in interpreting and translating training.

The challenges of insufficient bilingual teaching materials were highlighted by both the teacher and student feedback. Having language specific training materials from the outset of the program continues to be a problem, as often these languages are involved in the program once only,

with the exception of Amharic, Dari and Khmer, which RMIT has offered more than once (Amharic and Khmer twice and Dari three times) since 2002. Most of these languages are not economically viable to be delivered continuously as the communities involved are often very small compared to those that are more established Asian languages. Nor is there the advantage as with some Asian languages, such as Chinese and Japanese, of having a constant feed of students from overseas. The program normally relies heavily on the LOTE interpreting teachers to convert available resources into their languages. The researchers are of the opinion that more collaboration has to be sought interstate and internationally in order to overcome this problem. Without strong financial backing and sufficient lead time to produce language specific materials, this continues to be an issue which the translating and interpreting staff at RMIT need to address.

The practice of team teaching in the interpreting skills and practice subject, although a costly form of teaching, has proved valuable in terms of classroom management by adding different discourse perspectives in the language pairs. It has also proved a useful methodology for teachers in understanding the radically different communication styles which are derived from a variety of cultural backgrounds. Teacher feedback in this case study indicates that the teaching pairs do not experience the intercultural difficulties that have been experienced in some Japanese EFL settings. One report indicates that only 56% of Japanese teachers of English were satisfied with their team teaching (Benoit and Haugh, 2001). We believe that the dialogic pedagogy (Game and Metcalfe, 2006) which views team teaching as a supportive relationship between teachers, with opportunities for students to provide input and engage in the teaching process is particularly valuable for the teaching of interpreting skills. It provides an important medium for teacher/student classroom interaction on vocabulary use, pronunciation and discourse style. We would like to see more professional development relating to the issues of cross-cultural communication and team teaching as a catalyst for developing the communicative competence of the students.

The multilingual skills that these students possess (at least three languages) and the life experiences they have had, make them highly desirable candidates for interpreter training. The researchers observed that their background from predominantly oral traditions and their multilingual skills made them very comfortable in dealing with oral communication contexts, and they appear to be more competent in transfer skills from one language into another as well as better equipped to cope with the challenges of switching between different language codes. In the final dialogue interpreting exam (NAATI Paraprofessional Accreditation Exam) in 2007, it was observed by one of the researchers who at the time was the program coordinator, that the students from the Nuer and Amharic groups were either not taking notes at all or taking very few notes. The content of the interpreted segments was often intact without significant omissions. This is in stark contrast to students from the other language streams of more established community languages, where students generally tend to take extensive notes, thus compromising their concentration on the dynamics between the two interlocutors both at the discourse and meta-linguistic levels.

This particular manifestation of more developed cognitive and memory skills may be related to the two levels of processing in second language listening performance observed by Field (2004). The Japanese, Chinese and Korean students come from an educational tradition which emphasises grammar and translation to the detriment of listening comprehension and therefore they have greater dependency on ‘bottom-up’ or lower-level processing, which focuses on decoding words in the speech stream. This results in a greater inability to build the words into higher levels of meaning.

Field (2004, p.368) notes that “much of the evidence of bottom-up dependency appears to come from reading, rather than listening”.

On the other hand, students with more developed oral skills such as those in the rare and emerging language streams tend to rely on ‘top-down’ or higher-level processing by taking in the message as a whole and then dissecting it into smaller components. This top-down tendency fits in well with Hale’s proposed theory of accurate interpreting, where in order to interpret pragmatically, the interpreter needs to process the message from the discourse down (see Hale, 2007, chapter 1). The relationship between the two types of processing is one of complex interdependence which has been discussed in previous research (Tsui and Fullilove, 1998). The ways in which language speakers from oral traditions process listening information in an interpreting context is, however, an area which needs further research.

4. The scholarship program

The scholarships offered by the VMC have provided an important incentive to generate a sufficient number to form viable class sizes, normally about fifteen students. It is worthwhile to note, from the researchers’ experience in co-ordinating the program, that the attrition rates in the rare and emerging languages are generally lower than in the other language groups. The researchers have observed over the years a very high degree of appreciation expressed by cohorts in these rare and emerging languages for the opportunity of studying in the RMIT Diploma of Interpreting and for the receipt of VMC scholarships, probably due to their life experiences prior to resettling in Australia. Most importantly, they all feel the pressing need for their community to access qualified interpreters and the implications for their communities of the current shortage of interpreters. Therefore the majority of them were able to complete the training with exceptional determination and devotion so they could eventually help in their community. The significance of funding by federal or state governments for the interpreting and translating industry was highlighted by Bell (1997).

The challenges of running these language groups discussed in this paper mean there will always be students, who, due to various reasons, are not able to become accredited at the end of the course. However the researchers strongly hold the view that these students should not be discarded as soon as they fail to become accredited, or be regarded as unworthy of being sponsored for their studies. We believe that, despite the relatively low level of accreditation, because of the acquisition of skills and knowledge which is part of their learning experience, the program still contributes to building social capital and promoting social sustainability in these migrant communities. Those who aspire to become professionally qualified interpreters can continue to build on their strengths, having obtained a good foundation through the training course, and attempt to gain accreditation at a later stage through the NAATI public examination system.

5. Conclusion

The findings of this small-scale study have revealed some useful information which may help to better understand the dynamics of training in these and other similar languages. The study identified a number of issues in delivering accredited interpreter training programs in rare and emerging languages. The most significant ones relate to attracting and selecting suitably qualified students, staffing and material development.

Government funding is crucial in attracting candidates for the program. The VMC Scholarship Program is one of a series of initiatives (e.g. Refugee Action Program, Community Recognition) which have been implemented by the VMC to address a range of settlement issues, but it is the only one that directly provides a financial incentive to the interpreting students of rare and emerging languages. Government support will continue to be critically needed if these courses are to be continued or even expanded into other languages which are or will be in demand in the future.

The majority of the rare and emerging languages offered by the program are often delivered only once. This deprives the training institutions of opportunities to accumulate language-specific materials and makes setting language-specific priorities difficult. Often the bilingual materials need to be produced on demand, and as a result, cost more. One way of overcoming this may be sharing the training materials among training institutions offering similar community interpreting courses both in Australia and overseas, thus spreading the cost of developing appropriate teaching materials. Another significant complicating factor is that in some languages such as Swahili, there are many spoken local variations of speech over a wide geographical area, therefore more consultation might be needed among NAATI, VMC and the program in order to make sure participants in the training are clear about the variety of language they are going to be trained in and how this would be handled during the course and final accreditation tests.

Finding suitably qualified teaching staff is a challenge due to the small pool of candidates. The incentives for attracting the few available candidates are limited. This issue needs to have specific strategies developed in order to be addressed. Once a LOTE teaching staff is recruited, ongoing support is needed, more so than in the established language streams. Team teaching seems to be an effective, albeit costly, method in supporting LOTE staff in new language programs and is proving a successful methodology at RMIT University.

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