

Training Public Service Interpreters in the UK: A fine balancing act

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ABSTRACT

The training of public service interpreters is a very complex endeavour that must balance pedagogical considerations and market requirements. This paper considers the interrelationship between academic programmes, qualifications, curriculum design and standards in the field of public service interpreting (PSI) in connection with the perceived status of the profession and the desirability of regulated monitoring practices, whilst not losing sight of the constraints imposed by socio-economic circumstances. The desirability of conducting extensive empirical research into the needs of public service agencies and PSI providers alike, as well as into the profile of interpreters, is also emphasised, in an attempt to match training provision and community needs in a multicultural, multilingual context. It can be concluded that a coherent, integrated approach to training, practice and quality assurance will result in an enhanced status of the PSI profession, which can only be beneficial to society at large.

KEYWORDS

Training, qualifications, curriculum design, standards, professional status, monitoring.

1. Introduction

The unquestionable need for the training of public service interpreters to professional standards stands in stark contrast with the reality of the situation in the market. Often, people who have no qualifications but happen to be (quasi)bilingual or who are in possession of an academic degree in a cognate area but have had no formal training in public service interpreting (PSI) act as interpreters in public service settings on a regular basis. In the best case scenario, these people do have the required knowledge of the language pair for which their work is commissioned; however, very rarely does monitoring of their professional performance (including, but not limited to, their linguistic competence) occur. Their ability to manage delicate situations, to adhere to a strict deontological code and to react and respond to the challenges arising is, regrettably, seldom formally assessed.

There are several reasons why semi-qualified and unqualified interpreters are called upon to perform such specialized tasks as linguistic mediation in court work, police interviews or medical consultations. Some language combinations are rare and it may prove impossible to identify a suitable interpreter in a given timeframe, if at all. For more common languages, availability of trained interpreters at short notice cannot always be guaranteed. Training opportunities are relatively scarce, especially in the case of some languages, and obtaining a relevant qualification can be both expensive and time consuming. Furthermore, although a National Register for Public Service Interpreters (NRPSI) does exist in the UK, the

attainment of full membership is not only contingent on tests and qualifications, but also on proof of PSI work in the UK to the tune of 400 hours (or 100 hours in the case of rare languages) (see NRPSI criteria for entry). This implies that a substantial number of interpreters who only have an 'interim status' of membership (for which no practical experience is required) or have not yet achieved 'full status' due to insufficient length of service have to be called upon in order to meet the requirements of the public service providers and their clients. For obvious and unavoidable reasons, the competence of these interpreters varies greatly and, as stated above, no monitoring mechanisms are readily available. Finally, there are some serious issues related to the status of the profession that have a significant impact on the composition of the workforce in PSI.

All these issues will be examined below, with the intention of providing a brief overview of the current situation in the UK.

2. Training and qualifications

In spite of the relative youth of research in the field of PSI and the emphasis on descriptive studies of the process itself, a body of scholarly contributions related to the pedagogical issues that surround the training of public service interpreters has emerged (e.g. Adams, Corsellis and Harmer 1995; Ostarhild 1998; Grbic 2001; Sandrelli 2001; Corsellis 2005 and 2008; Hale 2007; Skaaden and Wattne 2009; Napier 2009). In any case, the wealth of publications on topics revolving around the generic training of translators and interpreters can be usefully leveraged to inform the debate on PSI-specific training. After all, public service interpreters routinely perform tasks such as written and sight translation, as well as dialogue (or liaison), consecutive and simultaneous (more often than not, in the form of *chuchotage* or whispering interpreting) interpreting.

In the UK context, dichotomies abound when the context and the focus of the training of public service interpreters are considered. Should this training take place in Higher Education (HE) or Further Education (FE) institutions? Should it be part of a wider syllabus or should it constitute a self-standing programme of study? Should it be pitched at undergraduate or postgraduate level, in accordance with the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), in Scotland, the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF)? Is there a difference between 'training' and 'education' or between 'vocational' and 'professionally-orientated' courses?¹

Only a handful of British HE institutions offer PSI as part of their curriculum. According to UCAS, this provision is pitched at postgraduate level without exception and from the information available at the "Find a Masters" website, it can be surmised that only one University offers a one-year specialised degree programme. On the other hand, there are a

number of FE institutions that offer PSI training as discrete programmes of study.

The advantages of incorporating a PSI strand (i.e. specialisation) or a (series of) module(s) into a wider university course are manifold:

- entry requirements for the course typically include specifications as to the linguistic competence of the candidates (assumed on the basis of the candidate's first-degree award classification in the case of foreign language(s) or international standards of proficiency in English in the case of candidates whose first language is not English), which bypasses the need to provide tuition or elemental support in terms of communication skills in the relevant languages of study;
- training in translation and interpreting techniques and strategies (e.g. note taking, shadowing exercises, turn-taking, situation management, semiotic transfer) provided in accordance with the learning objectives for other generic modules or course components can be leveraged (see above) for its application to specific public service settings;
- the methodological approaches to reflexive learning and the continuous professional development of translators and interpreters that PSI has in common with other cognate areas (e.g. written translation, liaison interpreting, language project management) can also be leveraged for the specific requirements of the profession;
- the tenets expounded for the purposes of general modules or course components on the theory of translation and/or interpreting can be applied to the skills that pertain to PSI;²
- specific modules on PSI modes of delivery (e.g. telephone interpreting, video-conferencing) can be incorporated into the pathway or course;
- the links between universities and the professional community tend to facilitate the involvement of public service providers in the facilitation of provision for courses and modules.

This is, of course, what could be described as a wish-list in terms of training provision for public service interpreters. The reality is somewhat different.

Language competence is assumed and it tends to be measured differently depending on the native language of the candidates and institutions stipulate (implicitly or explicitly) different scores on internationally-recognised tests as to their proficiency in English. There is also a degree

of flexibility as to degree classifications in the case of native speakers of English (mostly depending on the demand for the course and, consequently, any caps or targets that are imposed). This requires careful consideration of how to plan and manage sessions with mixed-ability groups.

Another important consideration is that foreign HE students who come to the UK and specialise in PSI may return to their home countries to develop their professional careers. Therefore, the emphasis should conceptually be (at the level of curriculum design) on transferable skills (i.e. skills that can be applied to the transfer between any pair of languages) and awareness raising (i.e. the development of generic competencies that can be extrapolated to the context of any given pair of cultures). However, as Corsellis (2005: 161) remarks, whilst conference interpreters tend to work with standard varieties of languages, public service interpreters do not. This poses a problem in that it would be impractical to run training sessions for, say, speakers of different varieties of Spanish, who, as stated above, may be in the UK temporarily and will go back to their countries of origin upon completion of the course with the intention of working in PSI. Mechanisms for independent learning, self-monitoring and, whenever possible, peer-assessment should be put in place, so as to compensate for the lack of input concerning the specific language variety.³

A further complication for HE departments offering this type of provision is the unavailability of subject experts to facilitate language-specific sessions. In some cases, lecturers and tutors who do not have knowledge of PSI are drafted in from the existing language departments in the institution. This is not a problem *per se*, provided that a PSI expert is present at the said sessions to provide subject-specific feedback, but it may result in an overly fragmented approach to the curriculum if the activities are not planned centrally, so as to ensure parity across all language combinations and a coherent approach. The fact that many of the so-called 'community languages' are not taught at university level is a more difficult issue. *Ad hoc* arrangements can be made (e.g. casual or part-time labour) in order to cover educational needs as they arise. However, the employment of a tutor or teaching assistant can only be warranted if there is sufficient demand for a particular language combination and this is not always the case.

The provision of PSI training in FE institutions has advantages of its own:

- entry requirements are more flexible than those for HE institutions and, therefore, attract a wider range of candidates;
- as the courses have a clear vocational bias, the students who follow them have high levels of commitment to the specific discipline;

- teaching arrangements are also more flexible than they tend to be at universities (e.g. part-time or block-teaching), which makes this type of provision more attractive for students with personal or professional commitments that would make it impossible for them to follow a HE course;
- courses tend to be explicitly based on nationally-recognised learning objectives (i.e. those set by the Chartered Institute of Linguists, CIL);
- students tend to be permanently UK-based, which makes it easier to target the courses towards specific market requirements.

On the other hand, many of these courses are marketed as “an introduction” to PSI and provision is typically restricted in terms of contact hours, which means that the staff input has to be supplemented by substantial self-study. As the courses are organised as self-contained, discrete units, there is no possibility of leveraging content from other programmes of study. Additionally, the limitations imposed by staff availability and student demand mentioned in the context of HE also apply here.

Universities have the ability to offer a range of exit qualifications (Certificate, Diploma, MA or MSc), depending on the candidates’ level of attainment, and, in the case of the UK, these tend to be awarded at postgraduate level. FE institutions generally award College Certificates. Their courses tend to be geared towards the provision of a learning experience directed towards the attainment of the Diploma in Public Service Interpreting (DPSI), which is awarded in accordance with the guidelines issued by the CIL. This is a “a first-degree level qualification (NQF Level 6) in terms of language skills required for those interpreting in the UK in a Public Service context” (IOL). As the level of the qualifications offered by HE institutions is higher than NQF Level 6 (and its equivalent in Scotland, SCQF 10) this orientation towards the DPSI is not explicit, although, of course, the possibility to take the exams (set according to the only standards that are recognised nationwide) is open to university students.

To conclude this section, it is worth mentioning that the relatively high cost of training and sitting examinations, added to the membership fees that are required by professional associations may act as a deterrent for potential interpreters from poor backgrounds. As a consequence, PSI involving some ‘community languages’ for which there is a high demand in the UK tends to be performed by unqualified individuals. This situation cannot be resolved unless there is a concerted effort on the part of the public service providers to incentivise these individuals (by means of, for instance, grants or scholarships, as well as training opportunities). For speakers of ‘mainstream’ languages, the same reservations concerning

the personal and financial investment apply; however the demand for such languages in other translation and interpreting fields (e.g. business, commerce, politics, education) tends to act as an incentive to pursue training in PSI as an 'add-on' to their academic (if not necessarily professional) portfolio. This is particularly relevant in the case of HE students.

3. Curriculum design

Training on PSI includes core components and often (especially in the case of HE programmes) additional related elements. It is noteworthy that language tuition is not overtly one of these (other than, at times, in the form of the acquisition or improvement of a third language that can potentially be added to the interpreter's portfolio in due course). As stated above, competence in the language pair that is to be used professionally is assumed.

Provision in PSI is, by necessity, segmented according to the different public service areas. The most popular specialisations are legal interpreting and medical interpreting, although requirements for other fields (such as interpreting for local government, NGOs or social services) are also tackled on occasion. In the UK, this provision mostly takes place in the form of face-to-face courses (often with an element of blended learning, i.e., a mixture of *in situ* tuition and components that are suitable for remote studying). Other countries are leading the way in terms of online learning in the field of PSI (see, e.g., Sandrelli 2001; Skaane and Wattne 2009) and no doubt this will become an increasingly popular mode of delivery.

The baseline requirements for the training and assessing of public service interpreters are:

- demonstrable competence in:
 - bilateral (liaison) interpreting in English (E) and the foreign language (FL)
 - sight translation into E and the FL
 - written translation into E and the FL
 - simultaneous interpreting, normally without equipment (*chuchotage*) into E and the FL

(All of these are assessed as part of the tests to obtain the DPSI. By default, when assessing these tasks, language competence and situation-management skills are also evaluated)

- awareness of:

- conventions that apply to bilingual mediation in the case of E and the FL
- conventions that apply to communicative events in the public service area(s) concerned
- ethical guidelines

Additional components of a PSI course may include one or more of the following:

- translation and interpreting theory
- formal tuition on codes of practice and ethics
- project management
- terminology management
- practical assignments (e.g. a mock trial in a court of justice, a mock witness interview at a police station)
- visits to the relevant facilities used by public service providers and their clients
- talks from public service professionals
- role-plays enacted with public service professionals
- telephone and or video-conference interpreting⁴
- placements
- projects or dissertations

Although academic expertise is crucial in curriculum design, the importance of matching it to market requirements is paramount in a field such as PSI. Thus, although national and cross-national cooperation can be beneficial in this respect,⁵ a degree of local specialisation is desirable. In Scotland, the Government commissioned a report on Translation, Interpreting and Communication Support (TICS) services, which was published in 2006 (Perez and Wilson). The project was completed by a team of researchers based at the Centre for Translation and Interpreting Studies in Scotland (CTISS) at Heriot-Watt University and it did not only provide a snapshot of the sector that brought together the views of TICS providers (both agencies and practitioners) and public service bodies, but also critically assessed the situation and made recommendations in accordance with the existing needs. As its two lead authors state (Perez and Wilson 2009: 10), the needs of different types of speaker need to be

catered for and a distinction has to be made between indigenous languages, languages of long-established communities, languages used by recently arrived individuals (such as asylum seekers and refugees) and languages used by visitors and temporary residents (such as students, tourists or business people). The need for specific languages is only one of the issues that require consideration: the expectations of the service providers and their experience and assessment of the existing interpreting provision also have to be taken into account. In 2008, CILT published a report entitled *Labour market intelligence for the Qualifications Strategy in translation and interpreting* (CILT), whose scope was UK-wide. Although this type of market-research initiative is welcome, projects of great breadth and length (such as the TICS report for Scotland) are required in order to ascertain all of the factors mentioned above as to each geographical area and in relation to PSI provision specifically.

As well as reflecting the needs of service providers (both interpreting practitioners and public service organisations), a solid PSI curriculum should map academic provision onto recognised standards. This concern will be dealt with in the next section.

4. Standards

As stated above, the DPSI is the only formal nation-wide qualification in the UK. It “[p]rovides a nationally consistent standard of professionalism for those who wish to progress into careers as interpreters using English in a Public Service context” (IOL). Thus, it guarantees the minimum standards that a potential public service interpreter should have reached before entering the marketplace. Wilson and McDade observe: “The consensus is that it [the DPSI] does not provide a fully satisfactory level of competence, but should ensure a minimum level of skill” (2009: 101).

One of the DPSI’s stated potential benefits is that it “[f]acilitates entry to [...] Masters degree level courses” (IOL). This is interesting in that it implicitly acknowledges that HE courses can further the level of competence of prospective interpreters. Nevertheless, as hinted at before, provision for students of university degrees that include PSI or specialise in it varies significantly from one university to another. National Occupational Standards in Interpreting (NOSI) do, however, exist in the UK (see CILT Interpreting). They were developed taking the National Standards for Interpreting and Translating, first published by the Languages Lead Body in 1996, as a starting point and their more recent version was made public by the National Centre for Languages (CILT) in 2006. They include two levels: professional level (Level 4) and advanced professional level (Level 5).⁶ These standards differ from those existing in other countries with a longer or more developed tradition of coping with the demand in this sector (see, for instance, health-care specific standards compiled for use in the USA (NCIHC. Ethics and Standards)), yet they constitute a useful tool for trainers and practitioners alike.

A good example of how these UK standards can inform PSI provision is included below. This is an adaptation (i.e. it excludes the information regarding specific content and related self-study/group-work that was originally present) of the outline for the taught training provision that underpins a module in PSI offered as part of an MSc course at Heriot-Watt University (reproduced with kind permission from Christine W. L. Wilson):

Week				
2	SEMINAR : INTRODUCTION [NOS /Units A1, B1, C1 etc.]	NLS	SEMINAR/WORKSHOP: INTRODUCTION [NOS/Unit D1 etc.]	NLS
3	SEMINAR: PREPARATION [NOS/Unit A1]	NLS	WORKSHOP: LIAISON	LS
4	SEMINAR: WORKING PRACTICE [NOS/Units A1, B1, C1, D1 etc.]	NLS	WORKSHOP: LIAISON	LS
5	SEMINAR : MANAGEMENT [NOS/Units C1 etc.]	NLS	WORKSHOP: LIAISON	LS
6	SEMINAR: PSI SPECIFIC WORK [NOS/Units C1 etc.]	NLS	WORKSHOP: LIAISON	LS
7	READING WEEK (directed self-study)			
8	SEMINAR: SIGHT TRANSLATION [NOS/Unit E1]	NLS	WORKSHOP: SIGHT TRANSLATION	LS
9	SEMINAR: CASE STUDY [NOS/Unit A1, C1, D1, E1...]	NLS	WORKSHOP: LIAISON + SIGHT TRANS	LS
10	SEMINAR/WORKSHOP: CHUCHOTAGE [NOS/Unit B1]	NLS	WORKSHOP: CHUCHOTAGE	LS
11	SEMINAR: CASE STUDY [NOS/Unit A1, B1, C1, D1, E1...]	NLS	WORKSHOP: LIAISON + CHUCHOTAGE	LS
12	SEMINAR/WORKSHOP: CAS E STUDY [NOS/Unit A1, G]	NLS	SEMINAR/WORKSHOP: WORKING STYLES [NOS/Unit G, C1]	NLS
TBC	WORKSHOP: ALL SKILLS (e.g. simulation of court case) [NOS/Unit B1, C1, E1,...]			NLS

KEY: NOS = National Occupational Standards (for Interpreting); NLS = Non Language Specific; LS = Language Specific

This kind of plan, which relates course activities to professional yardsticks, serves not only to inform lecturers and tutors in their facilitation of learning and their assessment of students' performance, but also to focus students' practice and to encourage them to work towards professional standards.

It seems clear that the establishment of a set of standards that underscore the criteria whose fulfilment must be shared by all public service interpreters whilst outlining public service sector-specific requirements is desirable. Close cooperation between service providers, practitioners and researchers would be required in order to achieve such a goal. And yet the establishment of such criteria to inform curriculum design and to match it against the actual needs of the public sectors is no guarantee of the quality of interpreting provision. As indicated earlier, and as it is to be expected in every walk of life, a degree of variation in quality is inevitable. The performance of the practitioners will depend on their linguistic competence, their ability to adapt quickly to challenging situations, their interpersonal skills and the particular circumstances of the interpreting task, which are external to any other parameter and particular to it. All these are difficult, if not impossible, to appraise in a classroom situation.

As the CIL acknowledges, and FE and HE institutions alike recognise or should recognise, tuition or the attainment of qualifications, although a good starting point, is no substitute for practical experience. Exposure to real-life scenarios can familiarise interpreters with situations that cannot possibly be actualised during a course of study. For instance, genuine distress or aggression on the part of the participants in a bilaterally interpreted exchange in a health-care scenario is considerably more difficult to cope with than "acted distress/aggression" in role-play situations, in which students feel safe.⁷ Also, practitioners have to develop techniques such as voice projection and management of body language in *chuchotage*, as interpreting for a member of the academic staff who they know and trust or for a public-service guest speaker is very different from interpreting for a rape or a murder suspect. Additionally, familiarity with the physical surroundings of the interpreted exchange provides invaluable contextual cues that cannot be reproduced in a classroom or an interpreting or language laboratory.

Given the circumstances described above, in terms of training, qualifications and practical experience, and the contrast between desirable competencies and real-life practice, two main issues need to be tackled: the professional status of PSI practitioners and their monitoring. These will be dealt with in the following two sections.

5. Professional status

It is a well-known, demonstrable fact that conference interpreters enjoy a higher professional status than PSI interpreters, which is reflected in their long-standing recognition as members of professional associations (and/or their status within multinational organisations) and their higher pay rates. Granted that conference interpreting is a more established profession and that it has received more attention (both in the public sphere, the media included, and the academic world) and recognition because of the invaluable role that it plays in international meetings, summits and high-level negotiations. Granted that conference interpreters have to undergo very strict testing and to comply with stringent criteria before they can start working professionally for an organisation or join a professional body e.g. the International Association of Conference Interpreters, known by the French acronym AIIC). However, and this is in no means intended to devalue the conference interpreting profession, it could be argued that public service interpreters work under more challenging and arduous conditions and that they serve a social function that is as important and, in some cases, more pressing than that of conference interpreters. For instance, conference interpreters typically work in a double booth (i.e. they have the support of a peer when working), whereas public service interpreters are generally “on their own” when performing their professional task⁸. Conference interpreters are not expected to mediate in bilateral communicative acts and, unless they are performing consecutive interpreting tasks, they do not have to interact face-to-face with the participants, whilst public service interpreters have to deal with the added pressure of being a constant physical presence in encounters that are of crucial significance to the individuals involved (e.g. patients, witnesses, suspects, medical and legal professionals). Conference interpreting lends itself to scrutiny more easily (which means that amendments can be made, should significant errors occur) than public service interpreting, which is seldom recorded.

This would seem to correlate to the value that is placed on global relations and the importance thereof. Nevertheless, the everyday needs of people who may be vulnerable and cannot communicate in the language of the country that they are in cannot be underestimated. Extensive empirical research would be required on the subject, but straw polls (and intuition) suggest that people place more value on having their health status or their legal rights properly represented in an emergency or personal-life determining situation than on global issues. However, the fees that conference interpreters receive are much higher than those that public service interpreters can expect.

Thus, we could legitimately ask ourselves what the profile of the typical public service interpreter is. It seems obvious that those who are fully trained and qualified are individuals with a strong commitment to their communities and to social justice.⁹ Because of the nature of the tasks that

they perform, most work as freelancers. Yet the question remains of who would be prepared to invest both time and money in being trained and becoming qualified to perform a highly-specialised, very demanding job¹⁰ that does not receive the same recognition as other similar professional roles, with little hope of being in full-time employment and to do so for little more than the minimum wage.

Thanks to increased awareness on the part of the public service providers and to an emerging body of legislation, *ad hoc* arrangements whereby completely unqualified or unsuitable individuals are called upon to perform interpreting duties are rare nowadays. Yet, as most HE and FE staff working in this area can testify, students who are not in possession of any relevant academic or professional qualification are routinely involved in PSI assignments, especially (but not only) those who are native speakers of 'rare languages.' The graveness of the potential consequences cannot be stressed enough.

Some scholars have dealt with the breakdowns in communication and the information loss that result from the employment of unqualified interpreters. Cambridge (1999: 201), for instance, analysed simulated exchanges in a medical setting, in which "language-switching [was] provided by educated but professionally untrained native speakers of the foreign language". Her findings "highlight the risks to all parties of dysfunctional communications across language and culture" (*ibid.*).¹¹ Regrettably, we do not have to look at simulations to realise the seriousness of the issue.

The media report all too often on court cases that have collapsed because of the lack of competence of the interpreters provided or other irregularities due to the use of language mediation. On 1st November 2009, *Scotland on Sunday* published an article (McLaughlin 2009) which quoted several of these incidents and outlined the concerns that the award of a three-year contract to a single translation and interpreting agency "to provide the overwhelming majority of work for the Scottish Courts Service (SCS), the Crown Office and the Procurator Fiscal Service" has given rise to (*ibid.*):

The arrangement means that even those self-employed interpreters with years of experience are guaranteed only £36 for a day's work, inclusive of travel costs. Many say they are being 'starved' out of their profession as a result—one veteran is now eking out a living as a taxi driver—and replaced by individuals with insufficient training and a potentially dangerous ignorance of the legal system.

The Director of the said agency admitted that "a fair number" of their interpreters are not in possession of the DPSI, but insisted that they look for "equivalencies." On the other hand, the Scottish Interpreters and Translators Association (SI-TA) claims that the allocation of work to a

single provider, which, as indicated in the article, resulted in a revision of pay and work conditions,¹² has led to a relaxation of standards:

Instead of having professionals, there's a system of self-certifying which allows them to drag in people from Indian, Chinese and Spanish restaurants. Many of the interpreters being used aren't even bilingual—they just have a smattering of another language (*ibid.*).

Consequently, SI-TA has undertaken the compilation of a database of examples of interpreting malpractice in the Scottish legal system, to be submitted to the Scottish Justice Secretary.

It seems unquestionable that enhanced professional status for public service interpreters, with its associated benefits, such as sensible pay and fair working conditions, is required, not only to attract properly trained and suitably qualified individuals into PSI careers, but also to retain highly experienced interpreters. Additionally, their concerns need to be addressed in a dialogue with public service bodies and for this to happen there also has to be an increased recognition of the standing of the profession.

One of the concerns, which has been pointed at above, is the decay of quality standards. As a result, the monitoring of practitioners, given the circumstances described, is an issue of crucial importance and yet one that hitherto has not received enough attention.

6. Monitoring

The issue of self-certification, alluded to in the previous section, is not unproblematic, especially in the case of newcomers to the profession. However, the DPSI is not available for all languages and, therefore, a mechanism for assessing the suitability of interpreters to enter the profession is required. Obviously, FE and HE qualifications can provide an indication of the level of competence of the candidate, but, as mentioned before, some of the most widely demanded languages are not covered in the courses either. In the case of experienced or established interpreters, competence is taken for granted (often rightly). PSI practitioners, as any other professionals are expected to engage in continuous professional development (CPD). Beneficial though CPD unquestionably is, it is usually undertaken on a voluntary basis and there is no follow-up in terms of externally assessing or recognising its positive impact on the interpreter's competencies and/or professional practice.

Hence, it seems desirable to design a monitoring tool that can be relied on by both public sector bodies and PSI service providers, but that can also be used by interpreters to demonstrate their professional ability and expertise. In other words, this tool would serve as a quality-assurance mechanism.

The question arises of whom would administer and manage the monitoring of public service interpreters. It can be argued that a common system of testing for each public service area (to supplement the DPSI exams in the case of languages that are not covered) should be designed, in order to ensure consistency across the country or region, by trainers in the education sector in consultation with experienced interpreters (if the trainers are not practitioners themselves). The results of the tests can be then used by PSI service providers (agencies or dedicated government departments) to assess the suitability of the interpreter for certain tasks (it could be the case, for instance, that someone who is not competent for interpreting in the medical sector can handle tasks related to local government business).

The tests can be administered by approved educational centres and they would include several stages:

- Initial evaluation (post-qualification)
 - for interpreters new to the profession
 - for existing practitioners who cannot demonstrate sufficient length of service (the CIL guidelines could be adopted for this purpose)
- Periodical evaluation after the initial evaluation and until sufficient experience has been acquired (see the point above). When feasible, this could be supplemented by peer review during assignments.

The assessment would be carried out on the basis of linguistic competence in E and the FL for all the tasks pertaining to PSI, of the candidate's subject-matter expertise, of their professional conduct (in terms of behaviour and awareness of ethics) and of their situation management skills.

Although relevant academics can inform the process, practitioners would be ideally involved (training would be required and clearly structured criteria would need to be provided, in order to ensure fairness and consistency), through professional associations:

- as expert observers (this would be crucial in the initial stages of the monitoring programme)
- as part of a peer-review process (whenever possible¹³ and once the monitoring procedures are well established) in real assignments.

In this two-tier system, expert advisors (both practitioners and academics) would provide formal assessment, both at the initial evaluation and periodical evaluation stages. Peer review would be part of

an ongoing formative process, which would inform the formal assessment exercises.

In the UK, interpreter-mediated public service events are rarely recorded, with the exception of some police interviews. Additionally, there are institutional constraints that prevent the release of real-life data, even if it were to be recorded, because of confidentiality laws and regulations. In the absence of the possibility of scrutinising real-life performances, simulations can be set up for evaluation. This can be done in three different ways:

- *In situ* (the expert advisors would be present)
- Video-recorded performance (to be sent out to the expert advisors. This is a more flexible and cost effective method¹⁴, and it would be especially useful in the case of minority languages and languages not frequently used)
- Via a video-conferencing system

Feedback would be provided to both the interpreter and his or her employer. A chart and/or a report based on suitable assessment criteria could be produced for each interpreter. This reporting system would record the performance of each interpreter at the moment of testing, as well as chart their progress over time, and would help encourage reflective practice. It would also facilitate the profiling of the strengths and weaknesses of the interpreters in the different areas. In the case of interpreters who need to address shortcomings in their performance remedial work targeting specific areas could be provided. Depending on the nature of the shortcomings, the remedial work could involve:

- Self-study (in accordance with guidelines provided by the expert advisors)
- Training (hands-on sessions)
- Attendance of awareness-raising sessions
- Participation in short courses

The involvement of the professional associations is of crucial importance if monitoring is to become a credible process. It would be in the best interests of all involved (public service bodies, PSI service providers, interpreters and service users) to make it so, as it would go some way towards avoiding the kind of errors and problems due to poor interpreter's performances mentioned in the previous section.

7. Conclusions

Given the multicultural and multilingual nature of the UK, it has become necessary to strengthen the levels of representation in the public sphere of those who do not speak English as their first language and sometimes have very limited knowledge of it, so as to ensure fair treatment for all. The recognised need for training public service interpreters has translated over the years into HE and FE courses that provide well-designed programmes of study. The development of the DPSI out of the 1983 Community Interpreting Project signified the creation of a professional qualification, and the inception of the NRPSI in 1994 meant the establishment of nationally-recognised standards required for entry into the profession. Associations that bring together public service interpreters look after the interests of their members and lobby relevant organisations and official bodies.

However, the PSI profession is not as well established as it should be and this is reflected in the lack of recognition from which it suffers. The levels of training that practitioners bring to it vary greatly and quality assurance mechanisms flounder at times. This needs to be remedied by means of stricter criteria on the part of PSI service providers and adequate monitoring of interpreters. Empirical research is required in order both to ascertain the level of service provided according to the current requirements and to anticipate needs. Gaps between service supply and demand also have to be addressed and incentives (financial or otherwise) for suitable candidates should be introduced.

Yet the overriding consideration is that, if the professional status of public service interpreters is not enhanced and they are not recognised as highly-skilled professionals who have undergone intensive training and stringent assessment procedures, the existing problems are likely to be perpetuated. Thus, there needs to be increased awareness of the importance of the role they perform, which should be rewarded accordingly.¹⁵ Finally, an ongoing review of training and other educational provision in PSI is also required, so that the criteria and standards for the profession can be catered for and to ensure that they reflect the needs of the market.

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Biography

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¹ In the case of these two dichotomies, the former element tends to be associated to FE provision, whereas the latter is more closely linked to HE.

² Theoretical underpinning is assumed in the National Occupational Standards in Interpreting (NOSI). See section 3.

³ For instance, a useful exercise would be to provide a glossary of terms in English and request that students provide equivalent terms that are used in their own cultural setting and that differ from those that belong to the standard variety of the language, which would then have to be checked and/or referenced by them, in order to validate them. In the case of denominations of the roles of public service professionals and institutions, students would have to undertake research to match them with their counterparts in their own country and, if this were not possible, to find suitable translations. A validation process would also be required in this case.

⁴ Telephone interpreting has been commonplace in countries like Australia, where geographical distances makes it the most practical solution, for decades (see Corsellis 2005: 163). For a comparison of telephone interpreting and on-site interpreting, see Wadensjö (1999). Nowadays, the increase in demand for PSI in most developed

countries and the relative scarcity of (semi)qualified interpreters for certain language pairs means that there is a growing interest in remote modes of interpreter-mediated communication (both in terms of training needs and of theoretical reflection), which have been enormously facilitated by developments in IT use (e.g. instant messaging, Skype). Video facilities are essential in the case of remote sign-language interpreting, but they are also used more and more for spoken languages.

⁵ Ostarhild (1998) states that training is “a more tangible area of collaboration across borders in that curriculum design is accessible to our counterparts in other countries. Better still, courses could be designed jointly though probably in outline rather than in detail” (Ostarhild 1998; Perez and Wilson 2006).

⁶ In November 2009, CILT started a consultation process regarding the creation of a third level, as a progression route for those candidates who find it difficult to acquire professional skills.

⁷ If recordings of real-life scenarios (e.g. police interviews, hospital consultations) in which such behaviour is manifest were made available, they could be incorporated in the training provision, so as to raise awareness and provide a basis for reflective study.

⁸ The exception being British Sign Language (BSL) interpreters, whose professional organisations guidelines state that they must work in pairs in court assignments. For a media report outlining the problems they face in the conduct of their professional duty, see Green (1996).

⁹ This raises the question of the impartiality of interpreters: can they be truly unbiased or do they, consciously or not, compensate for imbalances in the power relations between the participants? The perception of their role by the public service agencies that employ them also deserves consideration, as interpreters may be seen as “champions” of a social cause or advocates of the participants who are not native English speakers. These are very complex issues that warrant further empirical research.

¹⁰ In addition to the stress that is associated to PSI by virtue of the situations involved and the scenarios in which it takes place, interpreters are often called out at times that lie beyond the normal working day (to deal with, for instance, emergencies of a medical or police nature).

¹¹ Also see Pöschhacker and Kadric (1999: 161) for an elaboration on how “the untrained (‘natural’) interpreter clearly fails to maintain a consistent focus on her translatorial role and task and introduces significant shifts in the form as well as the substance of communication” in an authentic interpreter-mediated medical interaction.

¹² For instance, the cancellation of travel expenses and travel time paid to interpreters, except in the cases when the interpreter has to travel farther than 70 miles for an assignment (SITA).

¹³ In the case of *chuchotage*, this would be virtually impracticable. Also, the presence of a second interpreter may not be welcome or admissible in some events.

¹⁴ The advisors may be unavailable at the time when the exercise takes place, but recorded performances can be evaluated at their convenience (within an agreed timeframe). Also, the cost of recording such performances and sending them to the advisors will be more economical than the payment of travel expenses and sustenance fees.

¹⁵ This could be achieved by a concerted effort on the part of the relevant professional associations, which should lobby public service bodies and PSI providers alike. If the former took an active role in discouraging the employment of unqualified, *ad hoc* interpreters, who may be willing to work for the minimum hourly rate, the latter would have to negotiate the honoraria that they offer to professional interpreters, lest they are not able to provide the required level of service or lose their contracts.