

*Teaching interpreting at a technical college  
The Granville experience*

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**Introduction:**

The Granville college of TAFE (Technical and Further Education) is situated in Granville, a suburb in western Sydney with a high concentration of Arab migrants. It began offering courses in community interpreting in mid 1996. The college also offers other interpreting courses in Turkish and Farsi. Training in Chinese, Korean and Vietnamese is offered at other TAFE colleges. The courses cater for the high demand for interpreters to assist migrants in the traditional areas of welfare, legal and health settings. The present study examines some aspects of interpreter training which are different from those commonly encountered in conference interpreter training. It also focuses on non-European languages in migrant communities.

**Interpreter training program:**

The college offers courses in interpreting at the para-professional, paraprofessional preparatory and professional preparatory levels. The paraprofessional course is offered on a full time and part time bases. It comprises of 300 hours and the course is structured around four main areas:

Theory, practice and ethics of interpreting	(108 hrs)
Contextual studies for interpreters.	(48 hrs)
Language Skills for interpreters.	(90 hrs)
B language consolidation for interpreter.	(54 hrs)

Successful completion of this course awards students with the vocational qualification of Diploma in Interpreting at the paraprofessional level as well as the professional accreditation of NAATI at the paraprofessional level. The other two preparatory courses at the paraprofessional and professional levels are designed to "prepare" students to sit for the respective NAATI tests. These tests are not supervised by TAFE and students have to make their own arrangements to be tested t NAATI.

**Rationale for the research:**

One of the major duties of the course coordinator is to liaise with students prior to applying for the course, throughout the teaching weeks and after the completion of the course. Experience has shown that Arab students come from all walks of life, have been in Australia for different lengths of time, have a varying linguistic command of Arabic, have different

perceptions about community interpreting and most importantly have different reasons for studying the course.

The teaching experience also reveals that adequate knowledge about the applicants' educational and professional backgrounds, if obtained early, could have a beneficial impact on the selection of students, design and synchronisation of the teaching materials, allocation of individualised assignments as well as on the determination of the pedagogic dose of linguistics and translation.

Few studies in the emerging discipline of community interpreting have focussed on the profile of the community interpreter as distinct from that of the conference interpreter or professional translator.

Lang provides a general profile of British students of translation and interpreting at Heriot-Watt University(1992) while Bowen can not answer the question of what is the ideal profile of a student in interpreting or translation simply because "there is not one". (194:176) Henderson, on the other hand, refers to the general personality differences between interpreters and translators (1987) and Fraser focuses on the community translator and believes that "extensive practice cannot compensate for personality factors".(1996:76) Fewer studies, however, have actually employed learner profile analysis as a means to enhance training by accounting for its findings in the pedagogy.

The profile of the community interpreter:

It becomes obvious that a learner profile analysis would be an appropriate means to get the required knowledge about interpreting student. To build the learner profile information are gathered from three sources: the application form, the interview and a survey given in the first week.

Examples of the information supplied by the students in the application forms provide a general view of the profile:

- age
- country of origin
- level of education
- professional background
- length of residence in Australia
- linguistic command of English

Other information is solicited during the interview and help compliment the initial picture:

- pattern of English language acquisition
- other languages spoken
- languages other than Arabic of habitual use(as in the case of Armenian, Assyrian, French, Kurdish and Turkish)
- level of bilingualism(particularly young Arab students)
- level of knowledge of contemporary Arabic
- employment and professional background

interest in translation and interpreting  
reading patterns in Arabic and linguistic maintenance  
the need for mother tongue reactivation

Further information is requested by means of a survey in the first week of the course :

reading interests  
writing activities  
literary interests  
cultural/historical interests  
interest in Arab cinema  
translation/interpreting activities(paid/unpaid)  
mixed marriages  
children bilingual education  
travel in the Arab world  
pattern of Arabic language acquisition(formal instruction in the Arabic language, education in Arabic, linguistic interests)  
computer literacy

Profile of the Arabic community interpreter:

Based on the above methods of gathering information and in addition to class observation and discussions with students (during and after the course) over a two year period, a typical profile of an Arab community interpreter could be drawn:

A female. Married into the same culture. With children. Average age 38. With less than eight years residence in Australia. University graduate. Studied a non-literary course. Employed in a different career. Speaks a second language. Lives close to Granville. Practiced interpreting for family and friends at least several times. Believes that being a native speaker of Arabic she has a sufficient command of it. Reads very little in Arabic. Reads more in English. Believes English is the weaker of the two languages. Did not study English formally. Believes that being a bilingual means *ipso facto* being an interpreter. Although owns a PC at home is computer illiterate. Wants to become a translator not an interpreter.

The full profile of the Arab community interpreter is still "under construction" and further data and analysis are still needed. Further description of each of the above findings will be made available later. For example, the finding that the interpreter is computer illiterate although owns a PC at home would be clarified by the fact that she comes from a generation and a culture where PCs were not part of the educational system and that the PC is primarily used by her school-age children. However, for the purposes of this study three important findings are of immediate relevance to the interpreting pedagogy, namely:

the average age of the community interpreter trainee,

the issue of linguistic competence in both languages, and

the preconceived notion about interpreting.

## **1- The average age of the student:**

One of the main features of teaching community interpreting is the high average age of the student.(Gentile: 1996) With an average age of 38 , students bring with them different educational and professional expertise. It is not uncommon to have PhDs and MAs in a wide variety of hard and soft disciplines reflecting the real world outside the class. Not only does this reflect specialised background knowledge but also discourse characteristics. The scientist does talk differently from the artist.

Quite often the class would have students from medical, legal and technical backgrounds. Their professional expertise, an asset to community interpreting, covers not only the subject matter but also terminological knowledge. The high average age brings also world experience, an invaluable feature when dealing with cultural specific imagery and idiomatic usage at the regional level. This is especially appreciated by the young student who was born or grew up (and educated) in Australia.

However, the high average age of students studying community interpreting has two significant drawbacks:

(a) Most students have been away from the disciplined environment of formal instruction. This tends to slow their cooperation with each other, their active participation in the class and carrying out home assignments.

(b) At thirty-eight, most would be in full employment and married with children. The hard act of balancing work and family commitments with evening study proves to be a difficult one for some students.

The high average age of the community interpreting student would not benefit much from Castellano's ideal career path:" Not until thirty do you start to be useful as a translator, not until fifty do you start to be in your prime."(1988:133) Nevertheless, the ideal picture Castellano describes has some valuable insights for all students to reflect upon.

The interpreting pedagogy must account for this serious aspect. Quite often, the preparation and presentation of materials and the employment of students professional knowledge would engage their interest and maintain a high level of motivation. The latter being an essential element in adult education.

## **2- Linguistic command:**

Experience has shown that most students have had little or no formal instruction in the first language. While all are native speakers yet their command of its analysis, a necessary skill for interpreting, is insufficient. Likewise, their command of the second language which is generally weaker requires considerable consolidation. This linguistic deficiency has a direct bearing on the teaching methodology and quite often a great deal of time is spent on terminology acquisition, analysis of syntactic structures and the cultural explanation of idioms. (Salama-Carr:1990)

Linguistic attrition and linguistic acquisition:

The student population of any community interpreting course comes from migrants. This fact has a direct bearing on the linguistic command of trainee interpreters. Depending on the educational background, length of residence in the migrant country as well as the type of second language acquisition students had, the interpreting pedagogy faces a challenge of striking a balance between linguistic attrition in the first language and linguistic acquisition of the second.

One of the most challenging issues is the fact that interpreters speak their mother tongue while living in the culture of their second language. Depending on the length of residence and mother tongue consolidation all migrants will suffer from linguistic attrition. For community interpreters, this condition could have a devastating effect on production skills: code mixing, unacceptable collocation, wrong idiomatic usage, fossilised vocabulary, whole-sale borrowing, morpho-syntactic interference and of course literal translation. Pedagogic experience shows regular reading and listening to good "native Arabic" tends to minimise attrition.

It has been noticed that community newspapers in Australia show traits of linguistic attrition. Gamal observes that community literature translated into Arabic exhibits "syntactic fatigue"(1995). He points out that translators working abroad have to be aware of the danger of linguistic attrition which shows very easily not so much in their choice of lexical items but also in their syntactic structures, idiomatic usage and cultural-specific imagery.

The library at Granville subscribes to two good quality Arabic newspapers from the Middle East. This provides the students with an excellent opportunity to collect parallel texts and to keep an eye on neologisms, semantic changes and shifts in the language.

Depending on the overall profile of the class, linguistic attrition could easily be remedied through consolidation and/or reactivation. Successful exercises such as watching a movie and discussing its linguistic features, compilation of parallel texts, creative writing and oral summarising are some of the exercises which engage the productive linguistic skills of speaking and writing. Fortunately, with a little motivation, this type of remedy can be done outside the class.

### **OzArabic**

Clyne observes that only a small number of the 75-100 languages spoken regularly in Australia has been described and that "they are nearly all Indo-European and do not offer a wide range of typological characteristics".( 1991:225).

It is interesting to observe the linguistic features of Arabic spoken in Australia. It exhibits a high percentage of morpho-syntactic interference. It is reminiscent of the linguistic jokes students carry out during their learning of English in the Arab world( eg; borrowings in part and whole, literal translations, deliberate mispronunciation, articulation of silent letters, puns, etc) Yet, it appears that the linguistic joke has become a linguistic genre. A new migrant would find it confusing to follow a conversation between two "native speakers of Arabic" in Australia. Gamal coined the term *OzArabic* ( 1993:143) to refer to the phenomenon of linguistic interference in Australian Arabic.

Community interpreters (particularly those recently arrived) need to be aware of the commonly used "borrowings". While interpreters (as language specialists) might dismiss such constructions (Ozarabisims) used by Arab migrants in their daily parlance as linguistic

impurities, the fact remains that interpreters must be aware of and able to recognise such linguistic features.

#### Dialectology in Arabic:

Arabic is spoken in twenty two countries over a large area in the Middle East. The language reflects the diverse historical, cultural and geographical traits of each region. Such facts would give rise to various "dialects" spoken in different countries. Even within each country there are several varieties. In Egypt, for instance, up to fourteen different varieties could be identified.

However, Arabic is bound together by its Modern Standard variety which is shared, used and understood by all Arabic speaking people. Although Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) is employed mainly in the written mode and in the media it provides an easy vehicle for all to communicate.

#### The unique experience at Granville:

Australia is a multicultural and a multilingual country due to its demographic make up. In the Arabic interpreting class at Granville, this demographic fact is reflected at the micro level. The class could have up to eight different dialects from Algeria, Egypt, Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan, Palestine, Syria and Sudan. This provides a rare linguistic opportunity to observe different dialects, learn more about Arabic and explore the fascinating world of dialectology and etymology.

While all interpreting students consider Arabic to be their mother tongue they speak other languages equally well. For instance, it is not uncommon to have Arab students who have a second mother tongue as in the case of Armenian, Assyrian, Farsi, French, Kurdish and Turkish.

For the past two hundred years Arabic has been borrowing words from many sources. Some of these loan words have now become deeply rooted in Arabic, despite their irregular grammatical patterns, that it is not even doubted that it has a foreign root or origin. The wealth of these "secondary" languages in an Arabic interpreting class can provide a golden opportunity to discuss meanings, clarify idioms, discover etymology and explore nuance.

What makes the Granville experience unique is the fact that such experience is not likely to take place in the Arab world. It is rare to find more than two or three varieties at any of the leading schools of translation and interpreting in Arab cities such as: Baghdad(Al-Mustansarieh school) Beirut(St Joseph school), Cairo(AL- Alsun school) or in Tangier( King Fahd school).

#### Teaching dialectology:

Unlike simultaneous interpreters community interpreters mix and mingle and communicate more closely with people speaking not the MSA variety but the local vernacular of different Arab cities. What the interpreting pedagogy at Granville does is to account for such variation by allowing equal time for each linguistic variety to be spoken and heard and encourage students to experience as many dialects as possible. After all, community

interpreters work on a freelance basis and they can not afford confining their work to one or two linguistic varieties.

### **3- The perception of "Community Interpreting":**

All the adult students are migrants with a varying length of residence in Australia (from several months to twenty seven years). This means that they have experienced "community interpreting" first hand. Some practice it more often than others and being speakers of English as a second language and residing in the culture of their second language, they, certainly, all practice it at the sub-conscious level. These conditions have led to the formation of some conceptions about interpreting. Quite often students come to the interpreting program with preconceived notions about interpreting which are at best superficial and at worst incorrect. (Gentile et al:1996) (Schweda-Nicholson:1994) (Harris 1992)

The commonly held view is that an interpreter must interpret everything and must remember everything. And since most are adult professionals, the interpreting process gets "interpreted" as an intellectual challenge which one must mobilise all available cognitive resources in order to overcome. This unfortunately leads to faulty interpretation characterised by paraphrasing (over interpreting) and morpho-syntactic interference. Due to the fact that there is no general profile of the interpreter in the media either in English or in Arabic, no interpreter memoirs as Margareta Bowen pointed out (1994) nor in the Do-It-Yourself literature, many aspiring interpreters have formulated their own ideas about the role and the techniques of the interpreter well before they seek formal instruction.

The issue of linguistic competence equated to interpreting competence is perhaps one of the major challenges for interpreting pedagogy. This stems from the erroneous conviction that being a native speaker means that one knows everything there is to know about that language. It is interesting to observe the reaction on students' faces at the first time they are challenged with an idiom in Arabic. When asked to analyse it for translation: there are, naturally, as many "interpretations" as there are students. But the instructive thing is that some "natives" actually get it wrong!! Students discover that while they understood the idiom, they may not know how to use it, or when to use it, or what it could actually mean in other contexts. A powerful example to shake students into believing that being a native speaker does not automatically entail total knowledge of the language.

#### **Misconceptions at the technique - level:**

The fact that students are professional migrants, they are, more or less, already in the system. They readily volunteer their "expertise" to family and friends and this "experience" tends to enforce their ill-formed notions about what interpreting is. Consequently, a great deal of time is spent on correcting preconceived notions about the techniques of community interpreting. For instance; note taking is practiced as speed writing. With less than optimal results as students realise that while they were busy taking down notes they forgot to listen to the message and to understand its meaning. Selecting, encrypting and spacing the notes taken is another concern.

Quite often, students blame their "old" memory for not remembering "everything". It is pointed out that meaning is more important than memory. And a balance between the two is likely to yield far better and reliable results than relying on "old memory" alone.

Another serious misconception about interpreting techniques is that terminology *is the key* to good interpreting. Students confuse translation with interpreting and would be happy to turn the whole class into a terminology building exercise. Little do they know, ab initio, that meaning and the ability to express meaning is the cornerstone of good interpreting.

Any program in community interpreting would do well to dispel such preconceived notions from the outset. An introduction to the nature of linguistic transfer, the difference between written and oral discourse, and the role of the interpreter as communication facilitator are essential for a clear and solid development of the basic skills of community interpreting. However, to successfully achieve this goal, theory and techniques must be cleverly complimented by a great number of examples.(Newmark: 1981)

The critical link:

The success of interpreter training programs depends largely on the expertise and resourcefulness of the teaching staff who as Schweda-Nicholson observes "are a rare species"(1994:215). Faced with limited resources in a migrant country, and the evolving nature of training in community interpreting the pedagogy must rely on practicing professionals and" be able to draw on their extensive on-the-job experience and access to authentic materials" as Davidson and Wakabayashi have convincingly pointed out.(1997:122) Teachers' experience in carrying research and reflecting on their own practice would ensure that the learner profile is constantly enlarged, upgraded and utilised particularly in the area of flexible learning. ( Butterworth:1995) Apart from pedagogic benefits, the findings could be fruitfully employed in determining whether students are already in the system, the actual purpose of doing the interpreting course and most importantly on giving appropriate advice on career paths.

Conclusion:

The significance of the present study lies in the fact that it is a reflection on practice with the view of reviewing and refining current pedagogic practice. It throws more light on the teaching of interpreting between non-European languages and it focuses on Arabic as a major community language in Australia. The findings and observations of the present study have relevant implications for other community languages, particularly the typologically - different ones such as Chinese, Korean, Turkish and Vietnamese. Since all these languages are taught at different TAFE colleges mutual benefit from similar studies would enhance both practice and research into community interpreting.

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