

Community Interpreter Training Programme in Denmark

Nina Hamerik
Copenhagen Business School
and
Bodil Martinsen
Aarhus School of Business

Abstract

In the middle of the seventies, the Danish Ministry for Social Affairs opened a so-called 'hot-line' manned by 4 phone interpreters, but over the years it became obvious that the existing interpretation services were not sufficient and needed improving. Thus, the first training programme was launched at the Copenhagen Business School (CBS) in 1985, followed by five other programmes from 1988-1990, and finally in 1996 a more comprehensive training programme was initiated by the CBS and the Aarhus School of Business (ASB).

The paper will give a short review of the general interpreter training situation in Denmark. Then, it will discuss the community interpreter training situation focussing on the new programme and giving a description of the curriculum and the ideas behind it.

The paper will conclude with a discussion of the various problems encountered when launching the programme.

Historical review - when did the need for interpretation arise?

Today, approximately 3 per cent of Denmark's population are immigrants and/or refugees and many of them still do not master the Danish language although a great many of them migrated to Denmark as early as in the middle of the 60s. At that period of time, Denmark needed labour. The Danes were well off, there was no unemployment, on the contrary, so lots of unskilled workers from Turkey, the former Yugoslavia, Pakistan, and Arab countries were invited to Denmark to keep the machinery running. And

they could get the machinery run. Over the years, these 'guest workers', as they were called, had their families come to Denmark in conformity with the Family Reunification Act, and hence the problems began. The Danes realized that they had to be able to communicate with these families whose children attended Danish institutions and schools, and when the various crises began in the 70s, the employment situation changed drastically and the 'guest workers' were fired and got into contact with the social authorities.

This is why, in the middle of the 70s, the Ministry for Social Affairs opened a so-called 'hot-line', manned by 4 phone interpreters, but over the years it became obvious that the existing interpretation services were not sufficient and needed improvement.

In the late 70s, a training programme was implemented at the CBS and ASB, financed by the European Social Fund (EEC). Unfortunately, the teachers attached to this programme were not interpreters themselves, and the courses called Administrative Interpretation Courses, were not really qualifying.

In 1982, the CBS received funds from the Ministry of Education especially earmarked for a community interpreters' course. At that time, the whole plan and idea of a full training programme was born, and after lots of sweat and tears, the first real training programme was launched at the CBS in 1985, followed by five other programmes in 1988-1990, because of the in flux of refugees from Iran and Irak, and finally in 1996 a full and more comprehensive programme was initiated by the CBS and the ASB.

Interpreter training in general

Interpreter training in Denmark for languages such as English, German, French, Spanish, Italian and Russian is given by the Schools of Business, to be exact, by the CBS and the ASB, which are universities just like "les Grandes Écoles" in France.

This training is provided as part of the Master's degree programme of these universities, which also includes a large part of translation in languages for special purposes. The interpreter training comprises both simultaneous and consecutive (including liaison) interpreting.¹

This interpreter training mainly aims at providing interpreters for the Danish market where they assure all kinds of interpreting : conference interpreting, community interpreting, business interpreting and legal interpreting as well as police interpreting and medical and social interpreting. Especially graduates in Spanish have been in high demand for interpreting in connection with interviewing torture victims.

Community interpreter training in particular

As it will be understood, there are normally no problems as far as community interpreting in the above-mentioned languages is concerned. The situation is - as mentioned in the historical review - quite different when it comes to community interpreting and interpreting in immigrant and refugee languages.

The new community interpreter training programme

Intentions and ideas

The intentions and ideas behind the programme are to meet the increasing demand for qualified interpreting for immigrants and refugees - and the keyword is qualified. As shown in the historical review, efforts have been made over a long period of time to train interpreters in immigrant and refugee languages. Of course, there are some good interpreters, but in general the interpreting is lacking in quality. So in order to ensure that any refugee and/or immigrant gets a fair, qualified, and equal treatment whenever he is in touch with Danish authorities (be it social, medical or legal), it was decided, in 1996, to establish a new and more comprehensive community interpreter training programme.

We all know that poor and wrong translation and or interpreting causes a lot of trouble and even pain and can turn out being extremely expensive - in more than one way - for the parties concerned. We also know that working as a community interpreter is a huge responsibility. As Hamerik normally says when talking about community interpreting, recalling all the EU debates concerning fish limits : “Guys, this has to do with human beings and life and death, not fish and money!”

The demand for more qualified interpreting did not only come from the service providers, i.e. from hospitals, social security offices, the Danish Red Cross, etc., but also from a large number of persons already working as community interpreters and having no or only very little training in the field and seriously wanting more training, first of all because they wanted to improve their qualifications, but also because they wanted to get a diploma and upgrade the profession.

Admission

In order to be admitted to the programme, applicants have to fulfil the ordinary admission requirements for entering a Danish university, i.e. 12 years of schooling (baccalauréat), and in case of a foreign 'bac', a Danish proficiency degree - oral and written Danish. And many of the practising community interpreters do not comply with these requirements.

If the ordinary admission requirements are fulfilled, applicants have to pass a written and an oral admission test. The reason why there has to be not only an oral but also a written test is that the programme comprises interpreting classes as well as translation classes. This may be an obstacle because there are many persons who are good interpreters but who are not capable of doing a written translation - and many good translators who will never be able to do proper interpreting. But very often the 'system' believes - and expects - that any interpreter engaged is also able to write a translation, and that is why translation is included.²

The admission test is general. The written test consists of two translations, one from Danish into the foreign language and one the other way round.

The oral test - to which the applicant is only admitted when the written test has been passed - consists of three parts : a conversation in Danish about a current issue, a translation of an unseen text from Danish into the foreign language, and a short interpreting test.

Once both tests have been passed, the applicant is admitted to the programme.

Scope

The programme is a two-year programme under the Open University, i.e. on a part-time basis and against payment of a tuition fee. Teaching takes place twice a week after 5 p.m. which means that students are able to work during daytime. The study comprises 14 weeks per term and 7 lessons per week. When the programme is finished, the students will have had about 400 lessons.

Demands on trainers

As already mentioned, the Danish business schools are universities. This means that only teachers who have an academic background (and as regards this particular programme, preferably are trained interpreters) can be employed, and such persons are extremely difficult to find.

The ideal has always been to have a Dane mastering the foreign language and a foreigner mastering Danish at A-level. Now and then this is possible, at least when dealing with languages such as Arabic, Persian

(Farsi), Serbo-Croatian, Turkish, Urdu (the Pakistani language), and Polish, but to find a teacher able to teach Somali at this level is almost hopeless, at least in Denmark.

Contents

During the first two terms, the programme concentrates on medical and social interpreting and translation. The purpose is to qualify the students to interpret and translate in social and medical settings. The contents of the two terms are as follows : interpreting techniques and ethics, dialogue interpreting, terminology (e.g. based on guest lectures), and translation from the foreign language into Danish and vice versa.

During the following two terms, the students are offered a specialization module and at the moment it is possible to choose between : court and police interpreting, extended medical and psychiatric interpreting, and/or business interpreting. Court and police interpreting and business interpreting include an introduction to simultaneous interpreting. The contents of the court and police interpreting classes are : note-taking techniques, dialogue interpreting, simultaneous interpreting, translation of legal documents and certificates, etc., and legal lectures. The extended medical and psychiatric interpreting classes comprise : note-taking techniques, dialogue interpreting, translation of various medical documents, and medical and psychiatric lectures. Finally, the business interpreting classes include : note-taking techniques, dialogue interpreting, simultaneous interpreting, translation of business letters, and lectures on e.g. cultural differences between Denmark and the foreign language area.

During all four terms, teaching is based on contrastive methods.

The different language groups only meet in connection with guest lectures which are held in Danish. Guest lecturers are practising doctors, nurses, social workers, judges, lawyers, police officers, business men, etc. who use interpreters in their daily work.

Exams

After the first two terms, an exam is held in medical and social interpreting, the contents of which are as follows :

- Interpreting ethics (in Danish),(oral),
- Facts about the foreign and the Danish speaking area (in the foreign language),(oral),
- Medical dialogue interpreting,
- Social dialogue interpreting,

- Translation from the foreign language into Danish, (written),
- Translation from Danish into the foreign language, (written).

Once the various tests have been passed, the student gets a ‘midway’ diploma and is entitled to work as a medical and social interpreter.

After the last two terms, a final exam is held for each of the fields of specialization, the contents of which are as follows :

- Translation from Danish into the foreign language, (written),
- Translation from the foreign language into Danish, (written),
- Dialogue interpreting.

The students who have specialized in court and police interpreting or business interpreting also have to pass a test in consecutive interpreting of a relatively long speech. Moreover, they are offered a test in simultaneous interpreting (optional).

All students who have passed the final exams are awarded a diploma entitling them to call themselves ‘Certified Community Interpreter’.

The launching of the programme

When the new programme was launched for the first time in November 1996, the number of applicants at the CBS and the ASB, respectively, was as shown in the table below :

Language	CBS				ASB	
	Nov. 96	May 97	Nov. 97	May 98	Nov. 96	May 97
Albanian	2	3	1	-	-	-
Arabic	45 (16)	41 (16)	16	14	16 (8)	7

	CBS				ASB	
Farsi	6	15	18 (8)	4	5	8
Polish	8	26 (12)	2	10	-	12
Serbo-Croatian	16 (7)	28 (9)	5	7	5	7
Somali	3	2	1	1	5	1
Sorani	-	-	-	-	3	1
Tamil	1	3	-	-	-	3
Turkish	15 (6)	16 (3)	17 (6)	3	8	6
Vietnamese	-	-	-	-	1	1
Urdu	3	10	5	2	1	-

Table 1. The figures in brackets refer to the number of applicants who passed the admission test, whereas the other figures indicate the total number of applicants before those who did not meet the admission requirements were sorted out.

For financial reasons, the minimum number of students is twelve per class, and only the CBS was able to start a class in Arabic after the first call for applicants.

After the second call for applicants in May 97, the CBS could start three new classes in : Arabic, Polish, and Serbo-Croatian, and after a third call for applicants in November 97, a class in Turkish.

The present situation is that the CBS is running two classes in Arabic, one in Polish, one in Serbo-Croatian, and one in Turkish with a total of 65 students. The first Arabic class passed the midway test in December 1997/January 1998, and the second Arabic class, the Polish and the Serbo-Croatian classes passed their midway tests in May/June 1998.

The Arab students who started on their third term in February 1998, have chosen the court and police interpreting module. The three classes starting on term three in September this year have all wanted a combination of court, police, and business interpreting and this is now being organized.

As far as the situation at the ASB is concerned, it has unfortunately not been possible to start any classes which is due partly to the small number of applicants per language, partly to the requirement of twelve students per class.

Exams - May/June - CBS

Three classes, the second Arabic class, the one in Polish, and the one in Serbo-Croatian, all did their midway test in May and June 1998.

The results were very satisfying.

It goes without saying that not all students passed, but on a whole the passing percentage was brilliant.

The results are shown in the table below :

May/June 1998

Language	Number of students	Oral				Written	
		Med.Int.	Soc.Int.	Ethics	Facts	Into Dan.	Into f.l.
Arabic	16	14	14	14	14	10	14
Polish	8	7	8	8	7	7	8
Serbo-Croatian	14	12	13	13	13	11	13

Table 2. It will be noted that the figures of Table 2 differ a bit from the figures mentioned in Table 1. This is due to the fact that not all students presented themselves to the exams.

December 1997/January 1998

Language	Number of students	Oral				Written	
		Med.Int.	Soc.Int.	Ethics	Facts	Danish	Arabic
Arabic	16	16	16	16	16	10	16

Table 3.

Problems encountered

The first major problem encountered was that many applicants, especially Arab applicants, did not meet the admission requirements. When they had been sorted out, the CBS was able to hold admission tests in Arabic (28), Serbo-Croatian (14) and Turkish (13), and the ASB in Arabic.

As already mentioned, applicants have to pass a written admission test before being admitted to the oral admission test. This rule was introduced by the CBS as early as in 1988, because experience had shown that the written part of the programme constitutes a huge obstacle for a big number of applicants. It is interesting to note that not only translation into Danish but also translation into the so-called mother tongue constitutes a major problem for various reasons. Many applicants do not read Danish well enough to be able to translate correctly into their mother tongue, and many - especially in the Arab and Turkish groups - do not master written

Arabic and Turkish at all.

Another major problem is that the ASB still has not been able to launch the programme.

Although Denmark is a small country, immigrants and refugees are scattered all over the territory, and the need for qualified interpreters exists in North as well as in South. It cannot be expected from students to travel 7 to 8 hours per day twice a week to attend classes in Copenhagen.

Consequently, the CBS and ASB are now working on a computer-based teaching programme in order to comply with the needs of the whole country. Such a programme is however rather complicated to establish, but will - so it is hoped - be a reality in spring 1999.

Copenhagen/Aarhus/June 1998

¹**The CBS also runs a postgraduate course in conference interpreting in order to meet the need within the European Union for conference interpreters, but still the languages involved are only languages spoken within the European Union.**

²**The Danish Administration of Justice Act stipulates that only those who have passed the MA degree in Translation and Interpreting are entitled to work as official (sworn) translators and interpreters, for instance in law courts. This is a fact known within the system, and thus all other interpreters are also expected to be able to do written translations.**