

Accreditation of interpreters and translators in the Netherlands

Introduction

The profession of community interpreting is not a recognised occupation in the Netherlands. Only for the modern or western languages, it has been possible to recruit interpreters and translators through recognised training courses on a limited scale. During the last decades the number of professionally trained interpreters fell short of demand, and so multilinguals without sufficient basic knowledge and skills entered the market. For a large number of languages in which interpretation and translation service was required, there were no educated interpreters and translators at hand for communication with immigrant workers and asylum seekers.

In 1976, interpreting agencies (the so called *Tolkencentra*) were founded to act as providers, which started to test and train interpreters and translators themselves.

At the same time, the Dutch Immigration Naturalisation Service, the police and the courts made their own lists of people who spoke a foreign language and, in most cases, Dutch. The application of selection criteria was marginal.

Among the professionally active interpreters and translators, there was a growing need for distinction from the non-professionals. At a working conference of interpreters, translators and trainers it was concluded that a personal accreditation system would be the most appropriate means to remedy this situation.

The Ministry of Justice is responsible for the entry procedure of asylum seekers in the Netherlands. During the time this procedure takes, they are also responsible for the well-being of the asylum seekers, which includes health care. The Ministry, by this time, had also come to the conclusion that there was a great need for good quality interpreters and translators and took the initiative for an accreditation system.

The Ministry carries the costs of the development of the accreditation scheme as well as a financial contribution for currently active interpreters who have contractually committed themselves to participation in the accreditation scheme.

The accreditation scheme

A Core Team¹, set up by the Ministry of Justice (consisting of Roelof van Deemter, test expert (University of Leiden), Heleen Keijzer (director of the largest training institute for interpreters and translators) and Marja Vonk (director quality of training and professional development of the *Tolk- en Vertaalcentrum Nederland*) co-ordinates and guides the accreditation scheme. There are collaborations with large leading (training) institutions that are specialised in knowledge and skills relevant for interpreters and translators.

Different committees have been established for the entire scheme to safeguard the developments in order to develop sufficiently valid exams and a balanced programme for in-service training.

Structure of the tests

Written knowledge test

Initially, all candidates have to participate in a written knowledge test consisting of four parts:

1. Knowledge of Dutch culture and society
2. Knowledge of the culture and society(ies) in which the foreign language is spoken
3. Knowledge of Dutch law and the most common legal terms
4. Knowledge of Dutch health care and the most common medical terms.

The questions for this test are being grouped according to their level of difficulty in an item bank at an agency specialised in the administration of examinations. For every test, the questions will be randomly selected from the item bank. This test only examines knowledge, not the productive language skills of the candidates. The multiple choice questions are being designed in such a way that they match the reading skills of interpreters, who don't have Dutch as their first language. Before the questions enter into the item bank, they have passed several stages in which they have been scrutinized by groups consisting of experienced interpreters and translators as well as specialists in the field who are used to working with interpreters.

In a try-out, the test was taken by those interpreters and translators who had been granted exemption until 2005 on the basis of obtained certificates.

Candidates who wish to prepare for this test and candidates who will have to resit the test, can take in-service training on specific subjects, or complement their lacking knowledge by means of self-study (through a reader).

After passing the comprehensive knowledge test, the candidate can sit for the practical interpreters' test and for the practical translators' test.

Practical interpreters' test

The interpreter test is taken for every language and consists of one or more role plays, a sight translation into Dutch and one from Dutch. Additionally, candidates' reproductive skills in each language will be tested. In the assessment, specific advice will be given if a candidate fails. All role plays will be recorded on video. Candidates will not be assessed during this role play. The assessment takes place after the video registration has been viewed. This enables those involved to aim at the most faithful representation of a situation as possible and it prevents actors from playing, observing and assessing simultaneously.

The test specifications are being prepared by test committees that consist of interpretation and translation experts. There is an executive committee for every language consisting of a coordinator, a Dutch native speaker specialised in the language in question and a native speaker of the foreign language. At least one of the committee members is an experienced interpreter.

Practical translators' test

Two practical translators' tests will be administered. Candidates are offered the choice to translate from Dutch or the foreign language only, or to translate from both. Equivalent texts will be used as much as possible.

The assessment is always performed by two assessors independently.

The assessors of the practical tests will be trained beforehand.

Validity of the tests

General aspects

The Core Team attaches great value to the validity of the examinations.

In view of the great interests at stake, in the first place for the interpreters, but also for the Ministry and the organisations involved, various aspects of the professional settings have been specified by practitioners in the field through task analyses and interviews. Moreover, professional associations of translators and interpreters have been actively involved during the entire development of the accreditation scheme.

Result

The language-specific testing material is being developed on the basis of:

1. Written text material
2. Language-specific manuals for testers
3. Scoring grids with proficiency levels for relevant skills
4. Rules for the calculation of sub-scores and final scores

As yet, the accreditation scheme is aimed exclusively at the interpreters and translators currently active within the Ministry of Justice and Health Care's field of activities.

In-service training for the accreditation scheme

There are two kinds of in-service training on offer. A distinction is being made between courses aiming at increasing the knowledge of a candidate and courses aiming to improve the language, interpretation and translation skills.

The following are in-service training modules specifically developed for this accreditation scheme:

1. Introduction to Law
2. Introduction to Health Care
3. Interpretation techniques
4. Translation studies
5. Dutch speaking and listening skills
6. Advanced course for Dutch as a foreign language
7. Knowledge of Dutch society
8. Knowledge of the foreign society

As of 2003, the Ministry of Justice intends to work with accredited interpreters and translators exclusively.

A legal recognition of the professions is currently under construction, which means that we may have to tighten up the norms in our accreditation scheme in the future in order to meet higher standards of professional competence.

With this, the profession of interpreters and translators will finally obtain the recognition it deserves in the Netherlands.

We invite everyone who's current and past experience in similar processes might help us to avoid the many pitfalls connected with the accreditation, to offer suggestions and advice. We would welcome any form of co-operation with experts from outside the Netherlands.

I am looking forward to giving you a progress report on the accreditation scheme once we have harvested our first experiences in the field.

Note

¹ Information about the Core Team can be obtained from www.kernteam.nl or you can direct your questions to info@kernteam.nl