

## **Promoting professional interpreting standards through students' internships**

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### **Abstract**

A community-oriented internship in a field related to the student's major is a requirement for the certificate in Spanish interpreting at Wake Forest University. Lawyers, doctors, social workers, school principals, hotel managers are transformed just by being around young interns. Faced with unprofessional approaches to their duties, students are compelled to educate their employers about the interpreter's role. Many choose to compile an awareness dossier, tailored to the needs of the particular interpreting setting, as their final internship project. The list of my students' successful interventions in the real world has surpassed my expectations. I will share examples of booklets prepared by my students and suggest other student-involving ways to promote understanding of our profession in the community.

### **Résumé**

Un des réquisits pour compléter le certificat d'interprétation en langue espagnole à l'Université de Wake Foresten Caroline du Nord est la pratique liée à la spécialisation d'étudiant faite dans la communauté : les avocats, les médecins, les travailleurs sociaux, les directeurs des écoles et les managers des hôtels sont, finalement, affectés et modifiés par la présence des étudiants du certificat qui font la pratique chez eux. Leur impact est sans doute remarquable. Les étudiants qui, dans ses lieux de pratique, rencontrent des attitudes peu professionnelles, se sentent fort appelés à instruire/former leurs employés au rôle d'interprète. Plusieurs étudiants choisissent de préparer pour leur projet final un dossier qui explique les règles pour travailler avec les interprètes dans le milieu spécifique où ils font leur pratique. Nombreuses sont les interventions bien réussies et parfois surprenantes de mes étudiants. Je présente ici les exemples de leurs pamphlets d'éducation et je suggère aussi d'autres possibilités pour promouvoir la profession d'interprète à travers l'expérience des étudiants d'interprétation dans les milieux de leurs pratiques.

## Introduction

My paper, even though under the category of training through practice, refers to training not the students, future interpreters, but training the parties for which one interprets, I will be talking about the students training the clients while doing their internship/practicum. Hence, this study falls under the category of public awareness or perception of liaison interpreting as a profession and it would be much more fitting to call it client/provider education. However, since the students play a vital role in what I propose to analyze today, the following analysis is the cross issue tied closely to various aspects of training.

My analysis of interpreting students as advocates of interpreting profession is based upon their final report papers which are part of the requirements for the internship course, The internship is a last class in a sequence of courses taken in our program of Spanish/English Interpreting Certificate that is offered at both undergraduate and graduate level at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, US. The internship is the last requirement that can be fulfilled either while taking an Interpreting course or after. The majority of my students do their internship during their last semester of their certificate program. The internship requires 100 hours of interpreting practice and is recommended to be done in a community-oriented setting, mainly for practical reasons. Even though due to the interior migration of Hispanics, the whole Midatlantic region (North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Virginia, West Virginia) has been experiencing the fastest growth of Hispanic population in the US according to the 2000 Census, within a radius of 100 miles from Winston-Salem ( this including Charlotte and other Piedmont Triad area cities– 3 mln people) there are only 4 interpreting companies that would take on interns.

## Framework

Corsellis (1995) states that the most effective method found so far to educate public service providers has been to assemble senior representatives from each of the services in a locality (1995: 81). Instead of educating the management of service providers I will focus here on a more grass-root initiative - raising awareness from down below. My research is more not on training the providers how to offer a better service but rather how to let them know what the interpreter does , how he does it and consequently how he should be treated, meaning how to convince people that interpreting is a complex process.

Corsellis says *“when there is a road accident police officers, doctors, nurses work together as a team. They know and respect- because they have been trained to do so – each other’s roles, responsibilities and strengths. The linguist must be able to stand shoulder to shoulder within the team on the same basis”* (1995:87); however he is often seen as a nuisance as somebody who is in their way. Many professionals, especially in some parts of the United States, do believe that they would do their job equally well without the interpreter and they think that the fact of having a linguistic intermediary is just an additional obstacle to be dealt with.

The main reason for that is, I believe, and I have found it confirmed in my students’ reports, other professionals’ lack of knowledge about the interpreting process. All the internship summaries report, without being asked to do so, on the need to increase the general understanding of the mental process of code-switching during the interpreter’s performance (de-coding, processing, re-formulating).

## **North Carolina context**

I will start with a brief description of the environment. Central North Carolina, in the past a main place for tobacco plantations and furniture industry, is nowadays a high tech, pharmaceutical, educational region, where Charlotte becomes a second Atlanta and Raleigh has long been known as a capital of Research Triangle. The region also has a high density of top ranked universities – such as Duke, University of North Carolina - Chapel Hill. It is important to mention this fact because that is why our community interpreting needs - besides the core ones, medical and legal (the only MA in legal interpreting in the USA, in our neighborhood South Carolina, College of Charleston made its name)- are in the labor market, education and sub-category of educational setting – research interpreting. Another important and specific to the Baptist South of the United States is faith-related interpreting which happens not only locally. Many Christian denominations organize frequent missionary trips to Central America, often in good faith but also with high marks of proselytism, as is the case of some strongly evangelical churches.

## **Study**

Taking the regional characteristics into consideration, my study is based upon the interpreting students experience in a non-professional and professional environment. The students are encouraged to offer their rising interpreting skills in community – service places but the unexpected and noteworthy outcome of their internships in such places results from interacting with other professional volunteers with whom they come to co-work on different charity or social projects. Examples of such projects include:

1. architects – Appalachian projects; Carribean projects
2. lawyers –Crisis Control center
3. doctors, dentists, nurses –Community Care Center
4. scholars of psychology – emotions, decision making, work pressure
5. scholars of anthropology and art– museum of anthropology, festive Hispanic days, local art district
6. scholars of history and law – projects in Spain
7. scholars of business and management
8. school principals and superintendents

The structure of this essay is organized around guidelines for those participating in an interpreting event that I have developed with my students over the past 4 years.

## **Homework – writing the guidelines for the clients**

The students are asked to prepare the guidelines for the participants in the interpreting event. These guidelines are modified every year as each new group of students has something different to share from their own experience. It has proved to be the most productive strategy to give the students first the guidelines for the speakers from the AIIC, (<http://www.aiic.net/ViewPage.cfm/page29.htm>) compiled by the team of conference interpreters. The students dissect them in both languages, with a playing out scenario and taking freedom to evaluate if they agree that it is important to include such a remark or advice in the guidelines or it is not.

Over the past 4 years, every interpreting class (56 students total) was asked to write the guidelines for the speakers and consistently there was a difference how the students would word and present their advice depending upon their previous interpreting experience. The most noticeable difference in writing the guidelines every semester was between the group that has had some previous interpreting experience and those who have not had any. They were asked to write short, simple guidelines for those for whom they would be interpreting trying to cover the widest variety of liaison interpreting taking into consideration especially: medical, labor market, religious, research questionnaires, education.

The average percentage over 4 years was 40% of students with the previous interpreting experience and 60% without. The results of the comparative study of the guidelines are as follows:

1. Group A with previous interpreting experience or those who were doing the internship at the same time - students keep producing not only guidelines but also explanation why one should act like that; - they consistently wrote very specific, detailed guidelines, including common sense remarks
2. Group B with no former interpreting experience wrote concise, brief advice statements; no additional comments

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*Examples:*

- (1) a. group B – Students 2 and 4: Don't use too technical terms versus b. group A-  
Student 1: Don't use words that are too technical if they are unnecessary. Interpreters' familiarity with the language used in some technical situations is minimal. Use more familiar expressions so that interpreters can give the nearest equivalent in their own language. Provide a manual for the interpreter with the necessary material to facilitate them in referring to scientific terms and complex processes.  
Student 4: Understand that it's possible that the interpreter may not know very technical words. Because of this, inform him before the session begins of specific words so that he can look them up.
  - (2) a. group B – Students 1 and 5: Speak clearly and slowly versus b. group A-  
Student 1: Speak slowly and articulate well so that you are understood. Pause when appropriate to allow the interpreter to do his or her job. Don't continue on tangents for five or ten minutes because you will be misunderstood.  
Student 2: Speak slowly - in order to fully comprehend the meaning of the statement, the interpreter must understand as much of what is said as possible. And Give the interpreter a chance to speak - when the interpreter is performing consecutively, stop every five minutes or so to give the interpreter the chance to give segments of the speech rather than the entire speech at the end; while you are practicing a speech, you may want to decide on certain stopping points so as to not interrupt a thought.
  - (3) a. group B – Students 1, 2, 3: Have patience with the client versus b. group A-  
Student 3: Have patience with the client because he has to explain himself well to the interpreter, sometimes in a different way than a well educated person from the United States would.  
Student 4: Be patient - remember that the interpreter is performing a variety of tasks that are invisible to you and to the audience; be polite and understanding if the interpreter asks you questions or asks for clarification
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Offering guidelines how to work with an interpreter has been a well known practice; usually they tend to be brief and concise, which appears to be efficient in a given moment but it does seem to be only an ad hoc solution to enhance the clients cooperation and to facilitate the immediate communication. It does not help though to inform the clients about the interpreting activity, and thus to increase public acknowledgement of the complexity of the profession.

During the in class discussion on their proposed detailed guidelines, students argued for the need of explaining the required behavior of the participant with supporting explanation and the detailed description of how the interpreter's brain works. The most frequent comment can be summarized as "*When you are a party in an interpreted event, you must always be mindful of the fact that the interpreter is constantly hearing and processing all of your words. This is a highly demanding mental process.*"

What I intended to demonstrate is that the students took their own initiative to educate the environment in which they were practice interpreting, be it a volunteering place, a company or a newly established language service agency.

## **On Site Awareness Promotion**

The students' own initiative to inform the public about the interpreter's performance was also shown in their choice of the final internship project. There are no recommendations or suggestions provided for students' final project topic; only structural specifications are given. While some chose to translate brochures/forms for sight translation or prepare other material to assist the future volunteer interpreters in their work, two –thirds of the project proposals had to do with educating the clients and the providers!

Below I present the list of the settings for which the awareness increasing projects were proposed and the excerpts from the students final projects that clearly indicate students emphasis on thorough and systematic education of the clients.

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### *Settings for on site awareness promotion*

#### *Volunteer*

Health care – 6 students: example of Parks (3)

Financial assistance office - 1 student: example of Jeff (1)

Faith-related (involving evangelization, or construction projects)– 5 students

#### *Professional*

Law office– 7 students

Education– 1 student

University level research – 3 students

#### *Language industry*

Translation/Interpretation bureau – 1 student: example of Meagan (2)

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Each of the following examples states the student's goal, contains a brief description of the setting and presents quotations from students reports of what they have accomplished in a particular internship site during their awareness promotion project.

(1) Jeff – at *Crisis Control Ministry*

*Goal:* telling the managers and workers who an interpreter is and what he does *Crisis Control Ministry* was conceived by compassionate and visionary church leaders who recognized that effective ministry to those in crisis was a full-time job. By coordinating the financial and volunteer resources of the churches with the expertise and services of social agencies, its mission is to provide emergency assistance to the residents of Forsyth County who find themselves in serious financial crisis. Clients are interviewed to determine the need, available resources, involvement of other agencies, and a realistic plan to move the client toward relative independence.

Jeff: I am sure that many of you are not exactly sure what the differences are between an interpreter and someone who is bilingual. A bilingual person will not be as successful as an interpreter. While bilingual individuals may be able to facilitate communications between English speakers and Spanish speakers, they do not do it to the degree of accuracy that interpreters do.

An interpreter is careful to listen to the exact words, tone, and register used to make sure the exact message is being conveyed. A second difference is that bilingual people do not have the training that an interpreter has. An interpreter knows not to interrupt the speaker, not to add or omit words, and not to put words in the speaker's mouth. In simplest terms, when interpreters are doing their job correctly, it will be like they aren't there at all. They will simply be a conduit through which the speakers address each other.

(...) Enclosed in this packet, in both Spanish and English, your will find guidelines explaining how to work with interpreters.

(2) Parks – at *Community Care Center (Centro Clinico)*

*Goal:* understand why the guidelines are not followed and how he reacted to it *Community Care Center* is a free clinic offering medical and dental care.

Parks: (...) in many clinics that treat mainly Hispanic patients, these guidelines are not in effect or not followed by the clinic staff. In my experience at the Centro Clínico, which is a free clinic and therefore treats patients with little income, the guidelines I have been taught were many times impossible to follow or had to be improvised. Not being able to follow a predetermined, professional way of interpreting many times resulted in various problems, which did not only affect me.

- no background information or previous medical history given, making unprofessional comments that they would not want to be translated, not allowing the patient to thoroughly explain himself to the interpreter (I can remember one instance when the doctor expressed to me that he did not believe that these Hispanics should be having children just so they can receive government aid unless they are married. Then while examining the same patient, he said that he should and could quickly perform a vasectomy on the man and he wouldn't even notice. I was a little shocked to say the least)

(...) Another guideline for medical interpreting is that the doctor should not interrupt the interpreter while he or she is talking to the patient. Many times at the clinic, I would begin to interpret and the doctor would start to say something else that was usually not even relevant to what I was trying to tell the patient or tried to jump ahead to the next issue before I had the chance to finish telling the patient the previous one. In general,

interruptions of this sort cause unwanted stress on the interpreter, and they are annoying to the patient who wants to know what the doctor said and may be anxious or worried.

(...) Even though the general guidelines for interpreting are not followed by the doctors at the Centro Clínico, the experience I gained there is invaluable. I tried to follow the guidelines even more so since they were not in use. Whenever the doctors spoke in the third person, I made an effort to say everything in first person. Many times, I would ask the doctor why the patient had come to the clinic and of their past medical history since they did not usually inform the interpreter. I refrained from giving advice to the patients although they would ask for it.

One guideline in particular that I tried to follow was avoiding giving my own opinion to either the doctor or the patient after I had seen first hand what kind of problems it caused. I can honestly say that after this internship I have learned what the guidelines are because I have used them all and also why there are guidelines that need to be implemented since I have seen the problems directly caused by lack of consistency, professionalism, and common sense while interpreting.

- (3) Meagan: at *Interpretare* (a Translation and Interpretation Agency. fake name for the purpose of this paper)

*Goal:* how to help develop quality professional language services in companies that in some cases are run by bilinguals people with no knowledge about translation / interpreting at all. I have heard of two cases like this in our area. *Interpretare* is dedicated to overcoming the language barrier businesses and communities face today. We provide an energetic, educational approach to effective communication in Spanish and English. *Interpretare* offers oral interpreting services for staff meetings, OSHA (Occupational Safety and Health Administration) training and safety courses, depositions, and other occasions.

Meagan: I initially thought that my internship would be focused on interpreting. In reality, I did more things than I thought I would. (...) I did mostly community interpreting in a variety of situations, from medical interpreting for workers compensation to individual employment evaluation meetings at Comfort Suites and North Carolina State University. My vocabulary of distinct industries flourished.

Unfortunately, most of my interpreting experience was unguided. I found that my boss was not too informed on the “etiquette” of interpreting: throughout the summer I learned about interpreting by doing it. At one point I even wrote an Interpreters Guide for the company to send out to our clients, explaining how an interpreter works and what will help an interpreter perform the best. It became clear to me quickly that our community lacks knowledge about the field of interpreting and translating.

## Conclusion

Lawyers, doctors, social workers, school principals, hotel managers, researchers are transformed just by being around young interns. They talk about glossaries (not vocabularies) and interpreters (not translators) when I go to observe my students at the end of their internships. At that time group leaders or managers (direct supervisors of my interns) fill the questionnaire about the student's work and I also interview them briefly. In 90% of cases, a statement related to the

student professionalism and his/her influence on the whole staff was made. Faced with unprofessional approaches to their duties, students are compelled to educate their employers/coworkers about the interpreter's role. The students take their tasks very seriously, and they are persistent. Their role is significant as they hardly made compromises because of the psychological dimensions here at play:

- students are not receiving any remuneration; they have nothing to loose;
- they only spend in those places 100 hours and then they leave not only the place but even the area; no inhibition factor
- they enjoy knowing something better than the accomplished professionals so they politely take advantage of share their knowledge with the career people; to show off
- they follow the guidelines with a zeal of a novice.

I was inspired to do this study and compile the relevant examples as it has become a reoccurring pattern in my 4 years of teaching interpreting and supervising students' internships at Wake Forest University. The list of my students' successful interventions in the real world continues to expand with every new internship local.

As a practical conclusion I would like to share here other ways in which my students have been promoting the image of an interpreter as a professional. The ideas still focus on making people understand mental processes during the interpreting activity. I have observed that both positive and so called negative advertising brings forth results.

## **Final suggestions**

Other than distributing written guidelines and brief descriptions of the interpreter's performance, suggestions to promote the understanding of the interpreting profession include:

1. casually discuss the curriculum of what is taught in interpreting programs and how challenging those courses are; everybody is in owe when somebody is accepted into a medical or law school but nobody really appreciates when they hear that somebody wants to pursue a career in languages;
2. depict the mental processes that occur in the interpreter's brain;
3. share statistics about the passing rate at the important state/government exams: NC court interpreters; how apt one must be
4. share facts about highly intellectual demands of the interpreting job such as interpreting profession stress level was ranked together with air traffic controllers, life talk show presenters, fire fighters, and front-line soldiers; nervous ticks of many interpreters; those are so called negative aspects which will build the recognition of the profession
5. talk about the misconceptions of the interpreters in the history; e.g. true story about the famous Malinche (relay interpreting Spanish-Nahuatl-Maya for Cortes), but also others; similar to the ATA initiative of giving the linguists the faces
6. educate professors and peers in other academic departments such as communication, psychology, economics, management, English during their in class presentation
7. encourage foreign language proficient pre-law, pre-med, pre-dentistry, pre-physical therapy students to take lower interpreting courses– they usually take it pass/no pass
8. take advantage of the entertainment industry/sports/political events to clarify the key position of the interpreter; a new movie with Nicole Kidman (world wide release in April of 2005) can have an enormous impact on the public view of the interpreters, so having handy some easy

to read resources on interpreting mental processes might be the appropriate preparation for the less formal discussion about the work of the interpreter.

## References

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