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Implementing Findings from Interpreter Education Research: The Asylum Crisis in Europe and the Case of Belgium


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Open Forum

The open forum section of this volume features an opinion piece and an interview, both from contributors in Belgium. Belgium has a long tradition of providing interpreter and translator education, not least because of its division into three different language communities, which has led to an increased awareness of the issues involved in achieving appropriate crosslinguistic communication.

Europe is currently experiencing an unprecedented influx of migrants and refugees from the Middle East and Africa. In the opinion piece, two educators and researchers argue that now is the time for policy makers to implement the findings of interpreter education studies to meet newly arrived migrants' and refugees' urgent need for language access. The two projects they describe are examples of research findings that should inform policy making in response to the refugee crisis currently unfolding.

Belgium also has a very active Deaf community, and tertiary education providers (such as the University of Leuven) provide sign language interpreter education, often in consultation with members of the Deaf community. In our interview with Filip Verstraete, who has long been an advocate for the Deaf in the Flemish-speaking part of Belgium, he talks about his work for the Deaf community and his experience as a consumer of interpreting services.

We welcome further submissions for the Open Forum section for *IJIE* for our 2016 volumes. In addition to interviews with scholars, practitioners, and consumers, we welcome transcripts of debates or presentations of case studies that will extend our understanding of current and future trends in interpreter education.

Implementing Findings from Research

Implementing Findings from Interpreter Education Research: The Asylum Crisis in Europe and the Case of Belgium

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“Europe is failing: 19 refugees have found a home, leaving only 159,981 to go” (Vidal, 2015). Thus ran the headline of a recent report in a Belgian newspaper, denouncing the way in which Europe is dealing with the refugee crisis. In other words: Europe cannot cope with the current emergency situation. In particular, there is a desperate demand for interpreters trained to work with refugees. We conducted research in Belgium to examine the effects of the lack of interpreters, and concluded that research-driven interpreter education, by trained interpreter educators, must drive any efforts to ameliorate the situation. In this article, we describe our research, offer recommendations, and discuss two projects pertinent to the current need for interpreters who are trained and ready to work with refugees.

The refugee crisis in Europe was all over the newspapers from the end of August right up to our submission of this article. This short opinion piece will not go into any details about what motivates refugees to leave their homes, nor will it address any of the speculations circulated by the media. Rather, we focus on what we see as Belgium’s lack of a structured and organized approach to the refugee crisis.

When refugees first arrived in Belgium in August 2015, they had no place to sleep other than a park in Brussels, where a tent camp of sorts had been set up. Later on, one vacant building was used for shelter. The Belgian Red Cross and other organizations provided food, water, beds, blankets, and basic hygienic facilities. However, aside from a social media presence (through tweets and messages), the authorities did not appear to take full control of the situation.

Reactions from the public were mixed and on the one hand reflected a rather antimigrant stance from certain groups in Belgium. Fortunately, there were also many volunteers that represented Belgian society in a more positive and encouraging manner, helping where they could, for purely humanitarian reasons. These volunteers,

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representing all layers of society and all different ethnic groups, started to help in a somewhat unstructured way by bringing in clothing, toys, and food and by offering their services. Some played music to provide entertainment for asylum seekers. Belgians are hosting refugees in their homes or are acting as foster parents to unaccompanied minors. And although this article discusses the situation in Belgium, it is important to know that volunteers responded similarly everywhere in Europe, from Greece to Hungary and from Italy to Denmark. Even so, reactions to the new arrivals were mixed around Europe, ranging from very positive to very negative.

It is here that our expertise as researchers comes in, as well as our concern that linguistic issues do not appear to be prioritized. After all, as the National Council on Interpreting in Health Care (NCIHC) says: “Language rights are human rights”. We wonder why no one appears to have considered the rights of asylum seekers to communication. In Belgium, the press seem to focus mostly on the physical aspects of receiving refugees: the “bed-bath-and-bread” metaphor that often appears in the Dutch-speaking media. Little is said about the physical and mental health of people who have often travelled in terrible circumstances, fleeing conditions that were even worse, risking their lives and those of relatives and friends, looking not for fortune but for a life without war and misery. Even less has been said about the children in this crisis. Unaccompanied minors have been mentioned in the press occasionally, but mainly with regard to asking the general public to act as foster parents, and without mention of language issues.

As researchers and interpreters, we could easily say: “There we go again”. Language never seems to be considered an issue, and language professionals are seldom consulted at times of humanitarian crises. Or, let us cautiously state that the expertise of professional translators and interpreters, in particular, is often ignored. The notion that everybody who knows two languages can interpret or translate is still prevalent—however, most people know that not everyone who can strike a ball can become a top professional football player! Society must come to appreciate the special aptitude required to successfully master interpreting and translation techniques.

Refugees, especially minors, need first and foremost a warm place to sleep, food and good hygienic conditions, but this is immediately followed by the fundamental human need to engage in communication with others. But in what language does this communication take place? A common language can sometimes be used for small talk, but if a child or young person wants to talk about his or her (physical or mental) pain, things get more complicated. Who is there to listen? And how can you really listen if you only understand one third of what is said? Of course, you can ask friends, family or companions to interpret for you, but ad hoc interpreters may be unable to create the necessary (psychological) distance (Russell, 2012). Untrained interpreters may find it difficult to be impartial, and may be inclined to censor information. Let us take the example of a 16-year-old girl who is put under pressure to act as an interpreter for her 6-year-old brother. How will she deal with parents telling her in an aside what to say and what to leave out? How will she deal with unfamiliar terminology? Unfortunately, this situation is not at all uncommon.

If a doctor, a nurse, or a social worker wants to speak with a traumatized minor, they can do that in a professional way through a professional interpreter. Child support workers must be made aware of the fact that such professional interpreters exist. They can work together as professionals in the same team where everybody knows their own role, and where agreements have been made on how to inform the others when these boundaries are at risk of being exceeded, or when they have to be breached for the sake of clear communication—for example, a pre-encounter briefing between an interpreter, psychologist and interviewer where the former is asked to flag any issue relating to understanding, mental age, or any cultural issue that appear to hamper communication. As Eva Kerpel (2015, p. 150) states: “On a minimum level, cooperation among the professionals (including the interpreter!) should involve having . . . an initial meeting before meeting the child; working out and maintaining a joint strategy; sharing all information”.

As we conducted the Co-MINOR-IN/QUEST project, which focused on interpreter-mediated interviewing and examination of minors in the legal sphere (criminal proceedings), we found that interpreters and the professionals they worked with were often not aware of each other’s roles. However, we also discovered that for others, teamwork was not just theory, but had become everyday practice. The Co-MINOR-IN/QUEST findings regarding interpreters’ professional ability to work in a team in the best interests of these minors are relevant to minors in the current refugee crisis. The main goal of professionals working with minor refugees should be reducing or preferably avoiding further or secondary traumatization, by working with trained interpreters in a setting where everyone is aware of the other’s role. To this aim, in the Co-MINOR-IN/QUEST project, we prepared a leaflet on how to work with interpreters before, during and after interviews with minors. Although the leaflet has references

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to the legal context, professionals in other fields can nonetheless use this as a guideline to work with minors who do not speak the language of the recipient society (Balogh & Salaets, 2015). As we wrote in an earlier publication: “Dissemination of research results, best practices and awareness raising have to reach everybody who is involved in criminal proceedings, not least the authorities, because all actors involved are equally responsible for (un)equal access to Justice if people can(not) be heard because of communication problems” (Salaets, 2014, p. 158).

The second of our projects relevant to the current refugee crisis is called “Training in Languages of Lesser Diffusion” (TraiLLD; (see KU Leuven, 2015b for more information). This project involves language and interpreting experts reflecting on how speakers of languages of lesser diffusion (LLD) can be provided with interpreter training in a manner that is robust yet efficient. It is impossible to describe the project in only a few lines, however, one of the key concepts first relates to the definition of an LLD as “a language that has relatively few speakers in one specific location or geographical area in relation to the population as a whole” (Giambruno, 2014, p. 94). The demand for interpreters in any specific LLD is continuously changing, depending on the movement of people fleeing or migrating at any particular point in time. For example, in the most recent refugee crisis, interpreters of languages of the Arabic world (with several regional languages) are needed. Other characteristics of LLD include the fact that such languages often do not have an official status, are sometimes not standardized or have minimal written resources. Just try finding a Dari, Pashtu or a Lingala interpreter within a few hours or even within a day!

Also key to training interpreters in LLD: Even when such training is organized, training materials are often lacking, there are no bilingual trainers and/or there are no trainers with the appropriate interpreting skills, and there are no facilities for online training. With the TraiLLD project, we try to give solutions for these problems, explaining how LLD interpreting training can be organized².

In the case of Belgium, Department of Internal Affairs would ideally be in direct communication with interpreting training institutes, so they could announce fluctuations in the origins of migrants entering the country. This would allow the interpreter education providers to anticipate which languages might be needed for interpreting at all levels and in all societal contexts. In the Netherlands, the Ministry of Internal Affairs is aware of upcoming migration flows and contacts the SIGV (*Stichting Instituut van Gerechtstolken en –Vertalers* Foundation of Legal Interpreters and Translators) so as to obtain information on the availability of professional interpreters, or to ask the SIGV to get training of interpreters in those languages underway. If the authorities were more prepared and organized, situations such as those in Hungary could be avoided: In that country, more than 1,500 refugees waited at the border, with just one single interpreter at their disposal. Does the government work on the assumption that all 1500 refugees speak and understand the same language and that the interpreter can do his job with a megaphone? It is unrealistic to expect interpreters to work without support, for 24, much less 48 or even 72 hours at the border, without facilities.

Fundamentally, we would like to see policy makers presenting a structural approach to interpreting in refugee asylum cases that relies on the expertise of expert organizations, researchers and universities. Authorities should have contingency plans in case of emergencies, and lists of professionals of different expertise to contact in such cases. In a country such as Belgium, with three official languages (Dutch, French and German), it is particularly critical that the linguistic and cultural needs of migrants who do not speak the dominant languages be addressed. All countries receiving refugees in the current crisis must prepare for interpreter education in refugees’ languages, some of which may be classed as LLDs.

To achieve these ends, authorities, governments, managers and administrators must become current in the research that demonstrates best practices. Academics should disseminate their research findings widely, and not remain siloed in ivory towers. Moreover, findings should be shared in the local languages instead of exclusively in the scientific *lingua franca*, namely, English. Interpreter educators have a voice that needs to be heard and listened to, so the findings of interpreter research can be implemented to the benefit of refugees in crisis situations such as the one currently unfolding in Europe.

² Available from: https://www.arts.kuleuven.be/english/rg_interpreting_studies/research-projects/trailld/flyer-trailld

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