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Can any Student be Trained as an Interpreter?

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Abstract

The paper reports the findings of the survey held at the Law Institute of People’s Friendship University of Russia. The objective of the survey was to learn and examine the opinion of interpreters on the issue whether all students of higher education institution can be trained as interpreters of specific setting e.g. law. The respondents of the survey are the interpreters with different practical experience of interpreting who assessed the requirements to court interpreters, abilities and skills they are supposed to have and improve. The correlation of foreign language skills and the knowledge of special setting is focused on. The paper includes some recommendations to training interpreters inter alia what skills and psychological mechanisms should be focused on.

1. Introduction

Academic and employment mobility, international tourism, population migration make people speaking different languages move around the world. Interpreting as well as translation helps people speaking different languages to communicate with each other in multilingual and multicultural environment. Interpreting implemented in some special settings e.g. educational, medical, and legal is of a crucial importance for better interpersonal multilateral communication.

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Apparently everyone correlates with a legal system of another country sometimes without any awareness of its specific traits. The assistance of court interpreters is becoming urgent as they make litigants who do not speak the language of the legal environment equal to the litigants who speak this language.

Court interpreting is realized not only in court but in law firms, law offices, law enforcement agencies, jails, prisons, in public agencies associated with judiciary, in investigation committees i.e. at pretrial, trial and post-trial levels. Court interpreters can help both police officers to examine witnesses and investigate the case and judges, prosecutors and lawyers to provide their duties and responsibilities. Moreover court interpreting can be differentiated into criminal, civil proceedings or administrative hearing etc.

Competent interpreting implies a lot of complicated processes e.g. analysis, decoding, encoding, language transformations, on the one hand, and cognition, concentration, attention etc. on the other hand. To make communication of the parties more efficient an interpreter should have professional competencies of legal language and good command of general foreign language. High quality court interpreting also assumes the awareness of (a) specific legal setting, legal services and a particular legal environment; (b) general facts about the history, social life, everyday customs and traditions of the country or countries where the foreign language is spoken; (c) skills of interpersonal communication.

The importance of court interpreting causes the popularity of interpreter’s profession among lawyers-to-be students who are looking forward to be enrolled in formal or non-formal courses of interpreting. The rating of such courses at Peoples’ Friendship University of Russia (Moscow) is very high. Some aspects of court interpreters’ training at the university are focused on in the research implemented by A. Atabekova (Atabekova, 2011). However, the practical experience even at the level of probation period shows that not all students can succeed in interpreting. The reason is not the lack of special knowledge or professional competencies but some personal traits or psychological problems that the students face.

To help the students in coping with their problems with interpreting practice, on the one hand, and to improve the practice of the court interpreting courses the following statement was assumed: as court interpreting is a profession and career not all students can are inclined to do it. Apparently to enroll the students into court interpreting courses, in particular, and into interpreting courses, in general, the issue of whether all learners can practice interpreting should be determined.

2. Objectives, methodology and research design

The objective of the research is to analyze the self-assessment data of the interpreters and the experience of their activity; to draft recommendations to improve the interpreters’ training at a higher education institution; to determine the issue whether any student of a Russian higher education institution enrolled in formal or non-formal courses of interpreting can be trained as a (court) interpreter and afterward practice as an interpreter in a special setting with high proficiency. The results of the research are supposed to be used in teaching practice.

The research included individual questionnaires of Moscow interpreters with different practical experience inter alia the first group consisted of interpreters with the practical experience less than 5 years; the second group of participants included the interpreters with the practical experience from 5 to 10 years; and the interpreters with the practical experience with more than 10 years were in the third group. The total number of questionnaire participants was 150, 50 participants in each group.

The questionnaire being the starting point of the research was tended to identify the general idea of the interpreters’ opinion of their activity and included both the closed-ended and open-ended questions. That gave an opportunity for the respondents to save their time when answering the questions, on the one hand, and to express their opinion on the issue under study, on the other hand. The questionnaire was supposed to be completed for about 20 minutes. The questionnaire included the following questions:

- How long is your interpreting experience? a) Under 5 years, b) 5-10 years, c) over 10 years
- Is interpreting your full-time or part-time activity?
- What is your gender?
- Do you think that everyone can work as an interpreter?
- What qualities are compulsory for an interpreter?
Taking into consideration the Professional Code of Conduct of an interpreter and the national Russian mentality, rate the requirements to a court interpreter in order of priority: confidentiality; neutrality; precision and completeness of the interpretation; professional conduct (an interpreter should be aware of his/her role, position, i.e. be modest, not speak in a loud voice and not draw anyone’s attention to his/her personality) (Katschinka, 2015); follow the Code of Ethics (Mikkelson, 2000).

How important is it for a court interpreter to be aware of the court procedure?

Is it compulsory for an interpreter to perform their professional duties objectively?

Do you think that the fairness of the case investigation depends greatly on the interpreter’s skill due to the accuracy/inaccuracy of the interpretation or it is almost impossible?

What is more important: to memorize the meaning of the text fragment and render it exactly in the target language or to maintain the style and the emotional component of the speaker’s statement?

Do you think that the answer to the previous question correlates with special setting of the interpreter’s professional activity and the time span of the professional career?

How important is it for an interpreter to know the rules of professional ethics when participating in a conflict situation?

Does the quality of interpreting from your native language into a foreign one differ from that from a foreign language into your mother tongue? Which way of interpreting do you manage to make more completely and correctly?

Is the level of perception important to make interpreting more perfect?

There is a video instruction on the work of a court interpreter made by Cambridge police. It shows in details the role of an interpreter in the public-law relationships. Do you think it makes sense to make a similar video instruction for court interpreters in Russia? Give your reasons (http://www.cambs.police.uk/help/professionalInterpreter/).

The survey was held within 2 month period. After that at the second stage of the research all information of the questionnaires received was examined and generalized.

3. Discussion of the research outcomes

3.1. Opinion of the respondents with interpreting experience less than 5 years

Among the respondents of the first group i.e. interpreters with practical experience less than 5 years were 65% female and 35% male, all got their education as lawyers. They worked not only as court interpreters but as lawyers of different kind as well. To their opinion any person with special training can be an interpreter. When court interpreting is implied, it is much better if an interpreter is aware of law and court procedure. As interpreting needs great concentration and much efforts the most important thing for an interpreter is the wish to perform this work properly. Besides, respondents are sure that to be a good interpreter a person should be: stress-resistant (100 % of respondents), sociable (80 %), tolerant (80 %), determined (70 %), unemotional (60 %). Some respondents also mentioned such traits as well-disciplined (20 %), polite (10%). As far as the requirements to a court interpreter according to the Professional Code of Conduct are concerned, they were rated in the following way: precision and completeness of the interpretation; professional conduct, neutrality, confidentiality and finally the necessity to follow the Code of Ethics.

100% of respondents of these group are sure that a good command of the English and Russian languages as well and law education are the main conditions of efficient and successful interpreting (here one should bear in mind that in our survey all respondents of this group turned out to have law education and training). Besides interpreters should have good memory and the ability to grasp and analyze a great extract of information.

Interpretation should be very objective without any personal impact though 70% think that exact interpretation is not absolutely important and sometimes an approximate rendering of the statements made by a well-qualified lawyers-interpreters are quite enough for mutual understanding and court procedure. 30% consider that though exact interpreting is hard to be achieved but it is a matter of primary importance as interpreting can influence the court’s
opinion and its verdict. To get better and more exact interpretation an interpreter should not hesitate to ask for more
transparent explanation of something that seems to be vague moreover note making can be very useful for this
purpose.

50% say that the interpreter’s professional practice/experience as well as its duration make positive effect on the
interpreting outcome according to the proverb “practice makes perfect”. The other half of the respondents strongly
denied this relation. All the respondents stress the importance of the awareness of professional ethics but to their
opinion it cannot help greatly when any conflict situation occurs.

The interpreters’ opinions split as far as the issue from what language it is easier to interpret inter alia 50% insist
that interpreting from a foreign language into the mother tongue is much easier as decoding closely connected with
thinking activity is realized in the mother tongue without difficulties. Much can be achieved due to natural sense of
the language and intuition which is well developed in a person who is involved in the language activity. The other
half of respondents have an opposite view. They say that interpreting from the mother tongue into a foreign
language is much easier as it is related with the level of perception and perception in a foreign language sometimes
is very complicated due to personal specific features of the speakers.

All respondents supported the idea of a video instruction for court interpreters. To their opinion it might be useful
especially for those who just start their professional career as a court interpreter.

3.2. Opinion of the respondents with interpreting experience from 5 to 10 years

Among the respondents of the second group i.e. interpreters with practical experience from 5 to 10 years were all
female, to our mind it can be caused by the following reasons: the disappointment in interpreter’s career, on the one
hand, and the concentration on the career of a lawyer, on the other hand. Nevertheless, the interpreters of this group
being questioned during the survey were also involved in both law and interpreting activity. Unlike their colleagues
with less practical experience these respondents insist that not every specialist can be an interpreter in general and a
court interpreter in particular. To succeed in this activity a person should have high proficiency of the foreign
language, well developed level of perception, good memory, and wide general education. 40% placed emphasis on
the awareness of business ethics and code of conduct and 20% focused on the importance of dress code.
Respondents of this group absolutely agree with their younger colleagues that the precision and completeness of the
interpretation is the most important requirement to a court interpreter according to the Professional Code of Conduct
and the least important is the necessity to follow the Code of Ethics. The other requirements took the following
positions: neutrality, confidentiality and professional conduct.

Interpreters of this group think that to know laws and court procedures is a must for a person involved in this
activity. They agree with the representatives of the first group on the issue that an interpreter should be objective and
neutral though they admit that sometimes an interpreter can influence the court e.g. a defendant can unintentionally
reveal some essential information. These respondents have no alternative concerning the best approach to
interpreting, they are sure that one should memorize the meaning of the text and then render it precisely.

Respondents of this group agree with the respondents of the first group that the interpreter’s professional
practical experience and its time span make positive effect on the outcome of interpreting but the reason is different
inter alia a less experienced interpreter may pay less attention to the meaning of the utterance for interpreting than to
the speaker’s emotions. The rules of professional ethics are inseparable part of interpreters’ activity and these rules
should be borne in mind in any situation.

Interpreters with practical experience from 5 to 10 years feel quite confident when interpreting from the foreign
language into the mother tongue and vice versa. In other words they feel no difference about it especially in cases
when the meaning of the utterances interpreted is obvious and its topic is familiar. In any case the level of
perception matters much and consequently should be constantly trained.

These respondents share the opinion of younger interpreters on the importance of a video instruction for court
interpreters. The objective of this video instruction is to enhance the professional level of the Russian court
interpreters.
3.3. Opinion of the respondents with interpreting experience more than 10 years

Among the interpreters of this category there are both male (20%) and female (80%). For 30% of all respondents interpreting is a full-time activity, these interpreters are female and they got their education as linguists or English language teachers, for the other respondents interpreting is a part-time job, they work as lawyers (10%), lecturers at law schools/faculties of higher education institutions (70%) and other jobs (20%).

All interpreters with full-time activity are sure that not all specialists can work as interpreters and court interpreters in particular; 70% of interpreters with part-time activity agree with their colleagues as far as this issue is concerned, the others (half male, half female) consider that under a proper, systematic and continuous training any person can get interpreting skills. To their opinion the most important interpreters’ skills are well developed listening comprehension skills (the so-called “linguistic hearing skill”), speaking skills, distinct pronunciation, communication skills, and such abilities as generalizing information and making logical conclusions, high level of cognition, perception and concentration. Moreover a court interpreter should have good knowledge of the legal setting of different countries and the rules of professional ethics. The interpreter’s level of proficiency in a foreign language should be C-2 level and the level of proficiency in the language of law should be not less than C-1 level.

The opinion of court interpreters with over 10 year experience is absolutely identical to the opinion of court interpreters with less than 5 year experience inter alia they rated the requirements to a court interpreter according to the Professional Code of Conduct in the following way: precision and completeness of the interpretation; professional conduct, neutrality, confidentiality and finally the necessity to follow the Code of Ethics. The most important trait of court interpreters is considered to be the stress resistance (100% of respondents). Like the respondents of the previous groups the interpreters with long interpreting experience think that interpreter’s influence on the court’s justice is quite possible though the objective position of an interpreter is desirable. Their approach to interpreting is to render the meaning of the fragment following its logics as well as the emotional state of the speaker if possible. Court interpreting needs precise interpretation and it should be borne in mind. Besides, court procedure of administrative case differs from the procedure in the civil court and the interpreter should be aware of it and know all the details.

50% of interpreters with practical experience over 10 years allege that interpreting from the foreign language into the native language is much easier than back. The exception is the case when an interpreter is bilingual and has lived among native speakers for a long time. The other part of interpreters feel more confident making interpretation from the Russian language into a foreign one as the perception as well as understanding in the native language are realized more efficiently.

100% of interpreters from this group claimed that a video instruction on the work of a court interpreter could be useful as the responsibility of an interpreter in public relations including law is enormous. In some cases an error of an interpreter can result in negative outcome for the parties of public (law) relations and court interpreters realizing their responsibility do not know how to cope with the problem. Such video instruction can promote the professional level of Russian court interpreters, it is as necessary as a written instruction of interpreter’s Code of Ethics. Moreover, to the respondents’ opinion interpreters should be certified and professionally qualified as court interpreters of the US Federal Court (http://www.uscourts.gov/services-forms/federal-court-interpreters).

4. Conclusion

Analyzing and generalizing the data of the survey the interpreters’ self-assessment of their activity and practical experience can be compared. Despite the diversity of respondents’ opinions the main tendency of interpreters’ activity assessment and self-assessment can be resumed.

The majority of practical interpreters suppose that not all specialists can work as interpreters. Those involved in this activity should constantly enhance their language skills (train listening comprehension and speaking skills, enlarge the lexical stock of words, improve the skills of grammar transformations etc.). Also perception, good memory and cognition as well as psychological stress resistance are of utmost importance for interpreters and their professional training. If interpretation in a specific setting is implied, e.g. court, the professional awareness of law
and legislation of different countries should be considered as a must. The lack of the interpreter’s legal awareness can result in misunderstanding and wrong interpretation and as a consequence can influence the defendant’s life.

The views of the respondents do not depend much on whether the respondents are female or male, have linguistic or law higher education, interpret as part- or full time job. In some issues the interpreters’ self-assessment does not differ even if the practical interpreting experience is taken into consideration.

Generalizing all the interpreter’s requirements the formal and not formal training of (court) interpreters should include different tasks and assignments focused on the development and perfection of memory, perception, ability of coding and decoding the information; linguistic skills mentioned above; communicative skills; knowledge of court setting including different aspects of law e.g. civil, criminal etc.

The development of interpreting skills should be implemented into teaching practice starting from the initial stage of higher education and involve the interpreting training from the native language into a foreign one and back. Special attention should be paid to training the ability to memorize a large fragment of an utterance while listening and then after decoding to render it into another language as close to the initial meaning as possible. Professionalism and the precision of interpretation were mentioned as the most important requirements of the court interpreter.

Answering the question of the paper title we can say that though the majority of interpreters replied negatively, in our opinion, higher education institution cannot discourage any student from being enrolled into interpreting course. The reasons are, firstly, natural abilities of a student can be not so evident at the beginning of the training; secondly, different people need different time and efforts for training. Though not all students can be court interpreters but the experience gained, the abilities and skills developed could be very useful for lawyers-to-be and consequently all students can be trained as interpreters.

References


