

INTERPRETER EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES – A NEW PARADIGM?

A FORMAÇÃO DE INTÉRPRETES NOS ESTADOS UNIDOS – UM NOVO PARADIGMA?

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ABSTRACT:

Historically, interpreter education has focused on specific language pairs and has aimed mainly at preparing conference interpreters, following a European-centered model preached by AIIC (*Association Internationale des Interprètes de Conférence*) since the 1960s. The current need for the U.S. market, however, tends to require interpreters to be able to function in court, health, and/or conference settings, among others. Considering the multiplicity of languages requiring trained interpreters, it is almost impossible for most institutions to create classes that focus on specific language pairs and interpreting settings.

This article proposes the concept that interpreters, in general, need the same basic skills, namely sight translation, consecutive and simultaneous interpreting skills, and can be educated in them together, since these skills are the same, regardless of the language pair and the setting in which they are to be used professionally. This has generated a series of interpreter education programs in the U.S. which follow a totally different paradigm or model from that preached by AIIC. Each time more, University degrees or stand-alone courses are multilingual and multipurpose. The few programs still existing in the country following the traditional “AIIC model” have become extremely expensive due to very small classes possible, where students and instructors share the same language pair, and may also face a shortage of faculty with both interpreting experience and the required academic degrees to be part of a University faculty.

RESUMO:

Historicamente, a formação de intérpretes se concentrou em turmas com pares de línguas específicos, com o propósito específico de formar intérpretes de conferências, seguindo um modelo defendido pela AIIC (*Association Internationale des Interprètes de Conférence*) desde, aproximadamente, os anos 60 do século passado, visando a atender, nitidamente, ao mercado europeu – mas adotado em praticamente todo o mundo.

As necessidades dos Estados Unidos nas últimas décadas, no entanto, têm apontado na direção de se formar intérpretes que possam atuar, principalmente, em situações judiciais, médicas e escolares, sem com isso eliminar o atendimento ao mercado de conferências internacionais. Além disso, a multiplicidade de idiomas que se fazem necessários na combinação linguística dos intérpretes no país torna quase impossível a formação de turmas com pares de línguas específicos, adotado no modelo tradicional.

Este artigo aponta para o fato de que as mesmas habilidades interpretativas, a saber, o desempenho nas modalidades consecutiva e simultânea, além da tradução à prima-vista, se fazem necessárias a intérpretes de qualquer par linguístico e em qualquer cenário de

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atuação. É esse fato que tem impulsionado a criação de uma série de programas de formação de intérpretes nos Estados Unidos seguindo um novo paradigma, diferente do tradicionalmente defendido pela AIIC: cada vez mais, os programas em universidades ou como cursos livres formam intérpretes num ambiente multilíngue e “multipropósito”. Os programas ainda existentes no país que seguem o paradigma tradicional tornam-se extremamente caros, devido ao pequeno número de alunos com o mesmo par linguístico; enfrentam, ainda, grandes dificuldades não só na manutenção das turmas em ritmo regular, mas também na contratação de formadores especializados e (nas universidades) com a titulação mínima para uma carreira acadêmica.

Keywords: Interpreter education. “AIIC paradigm”. New paradigm. Multilanguage. Multipurpose.

Palavras-chave: Formação de intérpretes. “Paradigma AIIC”. Novo paradigma. Multilíngue. Múltiplos propósitos.

1 Introduction

Two points have to be made at the start: (1) this article uses the words “interpreting,” “interpreter,” and “interpret” to refer to spoken languages, not to sign language, which is not the subject of this article. (2) The International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC) classifies languages as A (native language); B (strong foreign language into which an interpreter can interpret from A or C); and C (passive language(s), from which an interpreter can interpret into A or B. More detailed explanation of this language classification can be found at <https://aiic.net/node/6/working-languages/lang/1>. This classification is commonly used by interpreters all over the world.

Although interpreting – meaning here oral translation between individuals or groups speaking different languages – has existed since times immemorial, interpreting itself was not considered a profession before the so-called Paris Conference, in 1919, at the end of World War I, that was convened to negotiate the Treaty of Versailles, and as part of it, the League of Nations. This was the first situation in which interpreters were hired as professionals. These first interpreters had no special training, being basically bilingual individuals in English and French, with a very good level of education. In the 1920s, the International Labor Organization (ILO – part of the League of Nations) put together a first interpreter training program for their own interpreters, who were the first to work in simultaneous mode (then called *telephonic interpreting*) and in languages other than English and French (see Baigorri Jalón: 2000.)

The first program designed to train interpreters in general (only in consecutive mode at first) did not come to life until 1941 in Geneva, and was then called *École d’Interprètes* – today part of the University of Geneva under the name of *Faculté de Traduction et d’Interprétation*. As has been the case ever since, interpreter training in Europe basically means conference interpreting, and most institutions aim at preparing interpreters to work for the European Commission and its associate institutions, or the several different members of the United Nations family of organizations. After the Nuremberg Trials, following World War II, and the establishment of the UN – both starting in 1945 – simultaneous interpreting began, at first slowly, to replace the consecutive mode of interpreting, for the sake, mostly, of expedience. Slowly, European schools began to appear and to teach both consecutive and simultaneous interpreting, following most directions reached at a Symposium held in 1965, by the above-mentioned AIIC, in Paris (see AIIC:1965) As can be inferred from what is said above, interpreter education was basically concerned with conference interpreting.

2 The AIIC Paradigm

The so-called “AIIC Paradigm” can be summarized as follows:

1. Programs should be offered at Graduate level.
2. Students are admitted only after passing an admissions test. This test can vary immensely from one institution to another.
3. The program director and all instructors should be practicing conference interpreters, preferably AIIC members. A rhetorical question can be asked here: are all interpreters and AIIC members necessarily able to teach and test for the simple fact that they are AIIC members? Teaching methodology and education assessment are not requirements for AIIC membership – or for interpreters, for that matter.
4. The curriculum and language combinations should reflect conference interpreting market needs. These, however, are not easily predictable since needs change from place to place, and from time to time.
5. Both consecutive and simultaneous interpreting are part of the program and of the final exams. Again, those final exams may vary immensely from one program to another, not to mention the criteria used for evaluating examinees. As far as educational assessment goes, this evaluation can be high subjective and differ from one member to another of the evaluation panel. Good testing practices would require a measurement called interrater reliability – which is never mentioned in the literature concerning Interpreting Studies.
6. The program should include professional ethics and practice. (See also Mackintosh: 1995.)

Although these guidelines provided an important direction for interpreter training programs, they are somewhat biased towards the European situation and to the association (AIIC) itself, and don't take several issues into account, as briefly outlined above.

3 Interpreter Education in the United States – the “AIIC paradigm”

Although universities having an interpreter education program can be found today all over the world, the first ones to come to life were in Europe (Geneva, Heidelberg, Paris, and Vienna, to mention the oldest ones). There were more than 60 graduate programs in Europe alone in 2006 (Donovan: 2006.) Many European programs (16 at the time of writing) are affiliated to the EMCI (European Masters of Conference Interpreting, associated with the SCIC (*Service Commun Interprétation-Conférences*, officially called Directorate-General for Interpretation) of the European Commission, headquartered in Brussels. The European Commission heavily subsidizes new programs in interpreter training and the EMCI consortium was established in 1997, after their own in-house training program was phased out. There is a general core curriculum to be followed by all schools, which mirrors what is being called here the “AIIC paradigm.” (see <https://www.emcinterpreting.org/>)

One exception among the pioneer programs established in Europe was the one created in the United States, in 1949, by León Dostert, who had been Eisenhower's interpreter during World War II, and who was responsible for putting together the interpretation team at Nuremberg and the team of simultaneous interpreters at the UN in New York. Before the war, he was already a faculty member at Georgetown University, and it was there that the first American program was created, following basically the same guidelines used in

the European schools: classes were made up of students and instructor sharing the same language pair, teaching consecutive and then simultaneous interpreting, aiming to prepare professionals for the conference setting, mainly the UN and the State Department. This pioneer program, unfortunately, was closed in the early 2000's, as part of a policy by Georgetown University to cut courses with a small number of students.

In the late 1970's, Wilhelm Weber was instrumental in organizing the program of Interpretation at the then called Monterey Institute of International Studies, in California. The whole institute was acquired by Middlebury College (a Vermont-based undergraduate institution) and was then named Middlebury Institute of International Studies, continuing to use the same acronym used before (MIIS). The former GSTI acronym (Graduate School of Translation and Interpretation, as it was formerly named at the MIIS) seems to be no longer in use. The interpreter program offers conference interpreter training in Chinese, French, German, Japanese, Korean, Russian, and Spanish, all paired with English. In the first decade of the 2000's Arabic was introduced, but it seems that it was only offered for a very short time. The program website presents it as being a "Career-Oriented Course Work" and advertises to prospective students that "professional practica and career-oriented course work prepare you for lifelong skill-building and professional growth." (<https://www.middlebury.edu/institute/academics/degree-programs/translation-interpretation>; accessed on November 2019.)

In the Fall of 2013, the University of Maryland established the GSIT (Graduate Studies in Interpreting and Translation) program, as part of their Department of Communications, following at first the same format, that is, conference interpreter preparation in specific language pairs, offering Chinese/English only in its first year. According to Sawyer and Parry-Giles (2013), "the absence of a comprehensive program on the East Coast is quite remarkable". By "comprehensive" it is understood that a program should offer several language pairs and train conference interpreters, since the authors state that "there are fine programs offering ... legal interpreting/translation" (ibidem, 2013, p. 11.) At the time of writing (November 2019), a look at the program website (<https://oes.umd.edu/graduates-post-baccalaureates-professionals/professional-graduate-programs/interpreting-and-translation-gsit>) indicates that it offers not only a Master of Professional Studies in two tracks: Conference Interpreting and Public-Service Interpreting, but also a 9-month Certificate Program in Consecutive Interpreting. The "Public-Service Interpreting track" as well as the "Certificate Program in Consecutive Interpreting" appear to show that what was planned as a "comprehensive program" in conference interpreting, following the "AICC paradigm" has been shifting to what most other universities in the United States are doing now, since the American interpreting market does not seem to have the same need for full-time conference interpreters as there are in Europe. The "Public-Service Interpreting track" seems to presently cater for the region where the institution is located – the suburbs of Washington, D.C., which hires free-lance interpreters for the State Department, OAS, World Bank and a myriad organizations located in the area. It is also worth noting that the instructors listed on the program website are mentioned as those who "have taught recently or are currently teaching in the program" (see website above) – what is known in academia as "adjunct professors" or, in other words, are not faculty members of the institution, and are employed on a needs-based situation.

4 Interpreter Education in the United States – a new paradigm begins to appear

The need for qualified interpreters in the United States is immense, but it is quite different from that which exists in Europe. Historically, the United States has attracted immigrants

from all over the world. These people do not come to international conferences of a professional nature, but come to live in the country. And they get involved with the court system, in a country where people have to appear in court for a simple traffic infraction. There may be hearings in immigration courts or bureaucratic issues to be dealt with in immigration offices. These people get sick and need medical care. Their children go to school and parents are expected to attend parent-teacher conferences, in groups or individually. All these situations create the need for interpretation. And the multiplicity of languages varies widely according to the city or state in which the situations happen.

The need for the so-called “community interpreters” has been growing every year in the United States, as it is growing in Canada, the United Kingdom and Australia. Coincidence or not, all of them English-speaking countries to which a huge number of people immigrate – legally or illegally – this is not an issue in the need for interpreters.

The term “community interpreting” means different things for different people. Some understand it as opposed to “conference interpreting” – whatever is not conference interpreting is community interpreting. For some others, court/legal interpreting is a separate profession, and not part of community interpreting, since it has been established for a longer time and the country and requires, at least in principle, a certification process, which varies from state to state, and also at the federal level. In the last few decades, it is medical interpreting that is also becoming established as a profession, although there is not a unique type of certification in the country, with different associations offering different certification processes and with it not being a legal requirement as is believed to be in the court system – which is not exactly true, based on this author’s experience working in the court system. Needs and resources have to be matched and it is not always possible to find certified court or health-care interpreters in many language combinations, varying also from one place to another. Nowadays, “educational interpreting” is coming up as a profession as well. Many school systems all over the country need interpreters – more for the use by parents than by the students themselves, who usually acquire English quite fast. There are school districts in the country where students speak more than 40 different languages at home. Their parents can only navigate the school system with the help of interpreters. Perhaps the need for training community interpreters has first been perceived in Canada and Australia. Canada has spearheaded a series of international conferences called “The Critical Link” focusing on several community interpreting related issues. NAATI – the National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters in Australia has also been dealing with this for decades.

Today, however, it has become a major issue in the United States. Does it eliminate conference interpreting? Not at all! Court interpreters, for example, usually also work in conferences when their language combination is required and they are hired on a free-lance basis, as most conference interpreters in the world. The skills used in daily court interpreting are not different from the ones used in a conference setting, and include consecutive and simultaneous interpreting, as well as sight translation (Pagura: 2018.) With this in mind, and matching needs and resources, many universities in the United States have begun to offer interpreter education. Programs vary immensely from one institution to another, depending on the needs and the resources available. Some are Graduate Certificate Programs lasting one academic year; many others are Masters programs, which usually take four academic semesters to complete. In most programs, the focus is on teaching the necessary skills for future interpreters: consecutive interpretation, simultaneous interpretation, sight translation, sight interpreting, ethics and professional practice, and also interpreting theory. The balance of these varies from one institution to another. Students are taught to apply the terminology of different fields

(legal, medical, educational, etc) to the basic skills learned and are also taught how to behave as professional interpreters in different settings. In many cases, students are native speakers of many different languages and have English as their B language; for this reason and considering the daily needs of the market, they are taught to interpret in both directions: into their native language (A) and into their foreign language (B). For American students, English is their A language, and their B language may vary to a large degree; the A language of foreign students also varies from place to place, and from academic year to academic year. Some students live on campus and attend classes in person; many others are all over the country or even in other countries, and join the class via a series of different online platforms for distance learning. They can all be in the same class (a blended class) or there may be an online group of students and an “on campus” group of students. This will, again, vary from one institution to another, from one academic semester to another. Once more, needs and resources are matched as possible and as needed.

5 Implementing such a paradigm – a personal experience

How is it possible to teach interpreting in such a way? This is a question that this author has been asked several times when discussing the issue with people who are not familiar with what seems to be the new tendency in interpreter education in the United States. As the English popular saying goes, “Necessity is the mother of invention” – that seems to be the source of all new knowledge, new technology, new methodologies. And history just repeats itself here.

Interpreting is one of the three possible areas of concentration in the Master of Arts program offered by the Center for Translation Studies (CTS), which is part of the School of Literatures, Cultures and Linguistics (SLCL), at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign – the other two being Literary Translation and Translation for the Professions (legal, medical, business, etc). The University of Illinois is a state university, which has two other campuses: one in Chicago, the most important city in the state, and one in Springfield, the state capital. The Urbana-Champaign campus, however, is the flagship campus of the institution, and at the time of writing has approximately 50,000 students registered on campus or online. Each campus functions, practically, as a separate university, although there is a single president for the University of Illinois system. The library on this campus is the largest in a public university in the United States and the third largest in the country – only the Library of Congress (the largest library in the world) and the Harvard system of libraries are bigger. The resources are many – in paper and online, which is very important for the students who are not physically present on campus.

The languages offered in the program may vary from year to year, depending on applicants. Once more, needs and resources are matched. During the acceptance process, the program makes sure that there will be “language support” for that student. This may be available through the CTS faculty (core faculty or associate faculty, that is, those who are part of other academic departments). When no one in the faculty can support a language, either a T.A. (teaching assistant) is hired from the myriad graduate programs offered by the SLCL or an instructor who teaches the language for one of the many language departments in the school. As it is, the translation or interpreting faculty are in charge of the courses and are specialists in their fields. The language support personnel are asked to help when there is a language issue that cannot be solved between the student and the faculty member without a speaker of that language. This most commonly happens in examinations of a practical nature and during the stage in which a student is working on their final project, required for completion of the degree. On a day to day basis students

work together with other who may share the same language(s) and also often work based on the principle of reflective teaching. In interpreting, students are required to record and submit their weekly practice exercises from A to B and from B to A. These are not graded individually, but are required so that students can reflect on their practice as they listen to themselves several days after interpreting a certain piece. In other words, they learn to be critical of their own work. Also, these recordings are shared online by students and they are encouraged to listen to and criticize the performance of their peers. Even if they do not understand the source language of a classmate, they can still understand the interpretation into English and recognize if it makes sense or not. The same principle applies to the faculty. We are always listening for sense, not words. We may not know the source language, but we know the topic of a speech and we can recognize whether it makes sense in English.

And how can one find speeches in so many different languages? One of the main resources is the so-called Speech Repository, made available by the dedicated colleagues of the European Commission. This is available for anyone these days online, different from what it once was. Not only are there speeches in all the European languages, but also in Arabic, Chinese, and Russian for practice purposes. They are graded from Basic to Very Advanced, and organized by subject and use (consecutive or simultaneous). Not only can this be used in class, but students can also access it from home, for the individual practice they are required to submit every week (see <https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/sr/search-speeches>.) Another source of speeches is the widely known TED Talks also available online at <https://www.ted.com/>. These are available not only in English but in many other languages – being English the language with the most availability, with Spanish a close second. TED Talks, however, is more suitable for students at an advanced level of interpreting. The hardest practice materials to find are those for beginning interpreting students. Not only has You Tube to be scoured for easy and simple materials (without subtitles, lest it becomes an exercise of sight translation, rather than interpreting), but also a variety of materials originally aimed at ESL/EFL students can be used in beginning class. ESL/EFL materials that offer recordings in the format of “mock lectures” are ideal. These are found in TOEFL and IELTS preparation courses, as well as in some materials originally meant for Listening Comprehension for ESL/EFL students. Last but not least, speeches made by the students in their native languages are submitted and kept in a repository that can be used in different semesters, by different students.

The program and concentrations offered by the Center for Translation Studies are exactly the same whether the students are on campus or online. Also, the faculty teaching on campus classes teaches the same online classes. Every faculty member is able to teach online classes – teaching online is considered basically a tool that allows students from many different places to participate, not a specialty in itself. Faculty members may be specialists in literary translation, terminology or interpreting – but all can teach on campus students and online students – sometimes at the same time, as a single blended class, from specially-equipped classrooms. There are no instructors hired specifically to teach online classes only or on a needs basis. All faculty members are full-time employees of the University of Illinois.

We use the term “on campus” rather than “face-to-face” teaching because online students can also see and be seen, hear and be heard synchronously by their professors and by the classmates. We use platforms such as Moodle or Compass to upload articles for the students to read, for example, or for the students to upload their weekly interpreting practice (an audio file) in a forum format, so that one can listen to the other. But this is

not enough for interpreting. We use Zoom or Blackboard Collaborate Ultra for synchronous classes on a weekly basis. Students at home from coast to coast in the United States, and also those in other countries, clearly talk with their professor and their peers, and do the same interpreting exercises at the same time. Those on campus work from professional simultaneous interpreting booths; those at home, pretend the computer is their booth equipment, and are required to use a headset with a microphone, just as any interpreter would use in the booth.

Most audios and videos used in class are uploaded either to the Moodle platform or to the Illinois Media Space – a resource provided by the University of Illinois, which is very similar to YouTube – so that students can, and are encouraged to or even required to – practice at home using the same materials used in class. Videos from the Speech Repository belonging to the European Commission cannot be uploaded, but students can access the Repository from home, at any time. All synchronous classes online are recorded with all the audio and materials, so that a student who couldn't join a class can watch it whenever possible along the semester. They are kept “on the cloud” for 120 days. All exercises can be done from the recordings as well as from the resources mentioned before: Illinois Media Space, Speech Repository, TED Talks, and YouTube. Most recent books and all the recent periodicals to which the library subscribes are available online and can be accessed by all students, wherever they are and at any time.

Just for the sake of exemplifying, at the time of writing (Fall semester 2019), this writer has interpreting students with the following language combinations – English A with the following B languages: French, Japanese, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish; and students with the following A languages (with English B): Arabic, Chinese, Spanish, Ukrainian/Russian (double A), and also a student who is a double A in English/Spanish, who is a “heritage speaker” – a term commonly used for people who were brought up in the United States but speak Spanish at home.

6 Conclusion: The new “paradigm”

In a country where universities are fiercely independent and autonomous, where there is no federal regulations for curricula or federal accreditation of universities by a government entity, a meeting like the one held by AIIC in Paris, in 1965, would have very little effect. The American pragmatic attitude is one of matching needs and resources, and of following usage and practice. So what is being called here a “paradigm” for interpreter education is nothing more than this author's observation of what is commonly being done in many institutions all over the country.

One can summarize what is happening in interpreter education in the following manner:

1. Most programs are multilingual. There may be language-specific classes occasionally, but those would most often be for Spanish-speaking students. Spanish, as is widely known, is clearly the second language in number of speakers in the United States, after English. There is clearly a new generation of interpreters who have both English and Spanish as their A language. There are some programs which only work with the English/Spanish language pair, in both directions.
2. Many graduate level programs are multipurpose, focusing on interpreting techniques which can be used in court, health, educational, and conference settings. There are several “stand-alone” certificate programs – shorter and not degree-granting – which focus on court interpreting or medical interpreting specifically and/or on a specific language combination, determined by local needs. Even programs originally designed for conference interpreting, following the “AIIC paradigm” as mentioned above offer “stand

alone” short programs for court interpreters, as it happens occasionally at MIIS or shorter programs as the one mentioned above at University of Maryland.

3. Most programs offer online and on campus programs and/or classes. Some offer “blended” programs in which the students can take some classes online and some on campus, or even “blended” classes, in which some students are on campus and others online. Others can be completely online or completely on campus. All online courses use a series of different platforms allowing for written asynchronous communication (such as Moodle, Compass, Canvas) and also those allowing for synchronous communication with video and audio (such as Blackboard and Zoom.) In this author’s opinion, synchronous communication with audio and video is fundamental for interpreting teaching. The asynchronous communication provided by platforms like those mentioned above is simply not satisfactory for interpreting, where video and audio sharing in multiple directions, with immediate feedback by the instructor and/or peer feedback, is fundamental for class interaction and for developing a sense of community for the students. This synchronous class format is very close to what many students will have to face as interpreters working remotely. Remote interpreting does not please some interpreters – this has been discussed by many in Interpreting Studies and will not be dealt with here – but it is definitely here to stay and students must be prepared for it. Sixteen years ago it was already being studied and discussed by one of the top names in Interpreting Studies on cognitive aspects regarding interpreting: Barbara Moser-Mercer (see <https://aiic.net/page/1125/remote-interpreting-assessment-of-human-factors-and-pe/lang/1>). See also Moser-Mercer (2005a, 2005b, and 2010).

4. In many programs, instructors are “adjunct” – as explained above, not full-time faculty members of an institution and hired on a “need-basis” only and paid by hour. In other institutions, there can be a mixture of career faculty members and adjunct instructors. Still in others, all instructors are full-time faculty members of the institution. In many cases, adjunct instructors are “advertised” by the institutions with appeals such as “industry experts” or something similar – and most people outside academia do not understand (or care) what the term “adjunct” implies. The implication here is to point out that in the case of adjunct instructors the turnaround of people teaching the courses is much bigger than those of full-time faculty members. The consequences for the program may be many but the discussion of this issue does not belong here.

The present article presented points discussed at a round-table presentation at the ENTRAD 2019, convened at the Federal University of Paraíba, Brazil, from October 7 through 11, 2019, and promoted by ABRAPT – The Brazilian Association of Researchers in Translation Studies. It goes into some more specific details and references which would not have been possible during an oral presentation. Most points presented are the author’s opinions and result from observation, as mentioned above, and do not reflect the position of any institution mentioned, unless it is clearly noted, such as in the case of the position held by AIIC in relation to interpreter education, which is often altered and updated anyway, albeit always keeping its basic tenets.

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