

**COMPETENCES IN PUBLIC SERVICE INTERPRETER AND TRANSLATOR TRAINING\***

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Training is a key element in the recognition and execution of any profession. Although translation and interpreting studies became part of Spanish university studies over three decades ago and the profession has progressed in a positive manner, this has not affected all fields of translation and interpreting in the same way. Public service translating and interpreting (PSIT) professionals have not yet achieved full recognition, and without such recognition by society and institutions, PSIT will not progress and dedicated professionals will not be able to achieve their full potential.

The aim of this paper is to investigate the importance of transversal and specific competences in PSIT, in order to improve future training in Spain. A survey of translation and interpreting students and professionals in Spain and the United Kingdom was conducted in order to understand to what extent specific competences for professional training are considered important for PSIT professionals.

**Key words:** *Public Service Interpreting and Translating, competences, training*

La formación es un elemento clave en el reconocimiento y la ejecución de cualquier profesión. Aunque los estudios de traducción e interpretación comenzaron a ocupar un lugar importante en los estudios universitarios españoles hace más de tres décadas y que la profesión ha progresado de una manera positiva, no ha afectado a todos los ámbitos de la traducción y la

interpretación de la misma manera. Los profesionales de la Traducción e Interpretación en los Servicios Públicos (TISSPP) aún no han alcanzado plenamente el reconocimiento y sin este reconocimiento por parte de la sociedad y las instituciones se verán estancados y no podrán evolucionar de modo positivo.

El objetivo de este trabajo es conocer la importancia de las competencias transversales y específicas en este ámbito para poder mejorar nuestra futura formación en España. Para ello, se realizó una encuesta a estudiantes y profesionales en España y el Reino Unido con el fin de entender hasta qué punto determinadas competencias se consideran importantes en la formación para estos profesionales.

**Palabras clave:** *Traducción e Interpretación en los Servicios Públicos, competencias, formación*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Public Service Translating and Interpreting Training in Spain

Training is a key element in the recognition and execution of any profession, and according to Pöchhacker (2004, p.166), for an activity to be recognised as a profession, specific knowledge and skills are required which can only be acquired through training. Translation and interpreting studies became part of Spanish university studies over three decades ago and the profession has progressed in a positive manner; however, this has not affected all translation and interpreting fields in the same way. Some professionals, such as conference interpreters, have achieved positive social prestige, whereas other areas, such as the public and/or social component of this profession, have not reached the same status. This has been noted to occur more often in Spain than in other European countries (Graham, 2009). Public service translating and interpreting (PSIT) professionals have not yet achieved full recognition, and without this recognition by society and institutions, PSIT will not progress and dedicated PSIT

professionals will not be able to reach their full potential. Whereas other translation and interpreting areas have had longer exposure in the academic world and have been included in study programmes since their commencement, subjects related to cultural mediation or PSIT have not usually had a specific academic space, although they are now being taught as optional subjects within some university degrees in Spain and it is hoped there will be further developments in this direction.

Examination of Spanish university degree study plans reveals that primary importance is normally given to technical, literary or scientific translation. While it is true that many degree courses include legal or administrative translation, they are rarely aimed at public services or at solving linguistic problems experienced by foreign residents. Regarding the interpreting techniques used in PSIT, subjects which require simultaneous or consecutive interpreting and the development of interpretive skills are being taught, but it is important to note that there is usually no course that teaches specific techniques aimed at providing services for foreign residents. PSIT is an area which especially needs awareness of the importance of the culture and customs of the languages studied, as in PSIT culture and language go hand in hand.

With regards to professionalisation, even more than in other areas of translation and interpreting, within PSIT there arise emergency situations in which clients need to solve interlinguistic and intercultural problems, and due to a lack of knowledge regarding this aspect, professionals are hired who do not have specific training in this area. In addition, it is often hard to find qualified professionals and this is one of the main reasons for the use of unqualified individuals who are usually volunteers. Ideally, translators and interpreting associations should ensure that quality standards are met.

## **1.2 Training in the UK and Spain**

Comparisons between countries where PSIT has reached a recognised position, such as the UK, and countries where it is only beginning to be developed, such as Spain, reveal a very different situation to be present. The UK has many more years' experience of

immigration, and so the awareness of the need to facilitate communication between people speaking different languages has developed much sooner than in Spain, a relative newcomer in terms of immigration issues, and still in the process of accepting this reality. The UK can be characterised by its investment in the training of professionals in the field of PSIT, which is why today it is one of the leading countries training professionals in public services. It is necessary for providers of public services in Spain to recognise this issue so that investment in the training of skilled professionals at university level is increased. However, academics appear to be more interested in this aspect than those who demand professional services. Training should act as an incentive for professionals, as it enables them to compete with those who provide their services voluntarily.

It is clear that one of the factors that is responsible for the shortage of training opportunities is the lack of recognition for the profession, which, in turn, is closely related to the social welfare policies and demographics of each country. Countries like Spain, that are not fully aware of the need to create services for linguistic minorities, do not consider the training of translators or interpreters who can offer these services relevant. Often, such countries offer language courses, rather than investing in the training of qualified professionals to meet the needs of foreign residents. In Spain, this has resulted in an abundance of cultural mediators, rather than an increase in interpreters. It is often non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or other associations that are responsible for the training of these workers, training which is usually informal or ad hoc in nature, and which is not included at all in most official programmes.

Conference interpreters are frequently asked to work in public service contexts. Since these professionals have basic training and expertise in interpreting, it could be expected that specialisation in public services would pose no problem. However, the reality is that they are very likely to be unprepared for work in this field, as interpreting techniques are different and they must deal with diverse slang terms, cultural differences, and employ different techniques for interpreting discourse. In addition, conference interpreters usually work with languages such as English, French or German, which are not often the languages of immigrants who need

to communicate with public service providers. Martí et al. (2000, p.171) note that 'although there are common characteristics between these two types of interpretation, not recognising the specificities of each type often leads to misunderstandings about the practice of the profession of interpreter.' In addition, working conditions and wages are very different, so it is conceivable that a conference interpreter would not be willing to do the work of a public services interpreter. As highlighted by Valero (2008, p.159) when quoting Roberts, 'interpretation in public services is considered the poor sister of interpretation, while conference interpreting occupies the opposite end.'

In 2003, Mayoral (2003, pp.128–129) suggested the creation of social translators or translators for public services in Spain. Either a specialised translator or a social worker would be able to aspire; social workers would need training in language skills, while translators would need to acquire knowledge related to public services and social work skills, together with specific skills for the interpretation and translation of administrative documents depending on the needs of immigrants. Unfortunately, this suggestion has received little support. Other possibilities include the creation of courses in geographical areas where specific needs have been identified, or the creation of distance learning courses. It is often difficult to create courses to train professionals in specific pairs of languages, as there are very few qualified teachers who can teach such classes.

In general, in all countries where conference interpreting is viewed as the pinnacle of interpreting, social interpretation is almost non-existent, and thus there is no formal training in it. In contrast, countries with a long tradition in public services interpreting incorporate related subjects into their universities' courses.

## **2. COMPETENCES IN PSIT**

As in all areas of knowledge, the training of translators and interpreters in PSIT requires the inclusion of specific skills, which differ from those competences needed for the training of translators and interpreters in other areas. An understanding of role and of the

limits of turn-taking techniques in the communicative exchange, a deep understanding of another culture, the ability to react to conflict situations and to create and foster relationships with other colleagues are some of the most important aspects that must be taken into account when training professionals in the field of public services. For training in the development of these skills, it is necessary for traditional translation and interpretation studies to incorporate trained teachers, in addition to adapting contents, rules of conduct, and teaching methods.

### **2.1 The Importance of Transversal and Specific Competences in PSIT Courses**

In 2010 the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) noted that ‘developing learners’ competence is an important part of the mission of higher education. (...) Education is about acquiring skills, but also about acquiring values and attitudes and learning outcomes have come to be seen as an essential feature of education policies.’ The practical outcome of focusing on competences is the design of methodologies that are appropriate for the acquisition of the relevant skills that are established in the learning goals of specific courses (De Miguel, 2006). Thus, a working methodology needs to be designed to take into account the context of a subject, so that it focuses on the acquisition of skills by students. According to Carazo (1999), competences are defined as a set of knowledge, standard procedures, and types of reasoning that can be put into practice, and thus knowledge acquired during training can be used in the workplace. If these skills are standardised, then workers know how to behave in the workplace because they have common rules and guidance for everyday practice.

The Council of Europe (2010) noted that generic skills are shared elements that may be common to any degree, whereas specific skills are related to each subject area. Thus, according to Rodríguez Esteban (2007), transverse or generic competences are classified as basic skills (the cognitive ability to understand and produce coherent ideas and reasoning, the methodological ability to organise time and learning strategies, to make decisions and solve problems, as well as linguistic competence in the working languages,

and technological ability related to the capacity to use computing tools), and interpersonal skills relate to the ability to use communication skills (individual and social), while systemic competences allow learners to approach reality assuming a combination of sensitivity, understanding and knowledge that enables people to see how the parts of a whole relate and come together. Transversal competences should be common to all study courses, and according to Rodríguez Esteban (2007), these competences should promote learning throughout life, as well as allowing for the interconnection of training profiles with professional requirements and taking into account the needs of society. There are also specific competences which are directly related to the application of theories, concepts or skills specific to a degree.

Since the aim of this paper is to determine the importance of transversal and specific competences in PSIT, we conducted a survey, consisting of thirteen questions, which was given to translation and interpreting students and professionals in Spain and the UK, in order to understand to what extent specific competences within professional training are considered important.

The first questions sought to determine whether the respondents were students or professionals. Students were asked to indicate their university and the degree or course they were studying, whilst professionals were asked to indicate what their speciality was and if they practised as translators or interpreters or undertook both activities and whether they were involved in cultural mediation. They also had to indicate what their working languages were, and if they were satisfied with the training they had previously received. Those who responded that they were not satisfied were asked to provide an explanation. In order to find out which qualities respondents thought a good professional translator and interpreter working in public services should have, they were asked to name the qualities that they considered the most relevant in such circumstances. Competences were presented and respondents were asked to tick and assess their importance. General competences were classified as 'instrumental', 'personal' and 'systemic', and respondents were also asked to explain which specific competences they believed to be necessary.

### 3. SURVEY ANALYSIS

In order to obtain the largest possible number of responses, the survey was distributed via social networks among different professional translation and interpreting groups, and also in university networks, as well as personally within three different UK and four Spanish universities. In total, the survey was completed by fifty-six participants in Spain and twenty-two in the UK.

In the case of the results obtained in Spain, 41% of respondents were students, while 59% were professionals, whilst in the UK, 46% of respondents were students, compared to 54% who were professionals. Of the Spanish professionals surveyed, 61% worked in translation, 10% in interpreting, and 24% did both, with only 5% working in intercultural mediation (PSIT). In the UK, 31% of the professional respondents were translators, 58% were interpreters and 11% were involved in intercultural mediation.

#### 3.1 Spanish Responses

With regards to the degree of satisfaction relating to the training received, 47% of Spanish respondents said they were very satisfied and 50% claimed to feel indifferent; only 3% stated that they were not satisfied. When asked about the shortcomings that they had observed during training, there was a general feeling (73%) that there had been insufficient practice during their training courses. All the participants replied that more importance and time was given to theoretical aspects of their courses and degrees. They also believed that subjects relating to interpreting should include more practical sessions in order to develop interpreting skills. In all, 83% of the participants stated that the level of language training had been insufficient, stating that they had needed to consider additional language classes, particularly when a third language was included in the programme of study, as more emphasis was normally given to the first two languages. Consequently, the respondents believed that additional study was necessary to reinforce oral and written language proficiency. In addition, 66% of respondents thought that there was a need to include more subjects related to the culture of the languages studied, and they noted that the range of subjects was often

poor and there was little choice. Respondents stated that they received little practical information about work, such as self-employment, wages, etc. Another important aspect which they found lacking, mentioned by 36% of respondents, was note-taking during courses or qualifications related to interpreting. They also believed that there was an important lack of interpreting facilities, such as cabins. An absence of the study of terminology was another area of concern for respondents, who believed that it should have carried greater emphasis in their syllabi. Furthermore, 72% thought that the duration of postgraduate courses was too short. In Spain, postgraduate MAs normally last one year and the respondents thought it was not possible to develop all the knowledge and practical skills required to become a good professional in such a short period of time. Furthermore, 45% also indicated that teacher quality was sometimes not up to the expected levels. Finally, the respondents reported significant levels of ignorance concerning specific professional skills, because in many cases the profession is not recognised.

According to the Spanish respondents, to become a good public services translator or interpreter it is necessary to have specific qualities in addition to mastering the working languages, including confidence in oneself, impartiality, objectivity, mental alertness, patience, empathy, concentration and mastery of stress. They also believed that a translator/interpreter must know how to treat users and have a good physical presence. Furthermore, public services translators and interpreters not only need to have knowledge of the languages and cultures of their speakers, but they should also have a broad general education. Of the participants, 71% noted that such translators and interpreters should also receive constant training and have extensive knowledge of their specialisation area. Codes of ethics and conduct were also an important aspect that was mentioned by 33% of participants.

In terms of generic skills, those most valued by Spanish respondents were oral and written communication in their own language, knowledge of a second foreign language, and the ability to solve problems. The most valued personal skills were ethical commitment, and the recognition of diversity, multiculturalism and interpersonal relationship skills. Finally, with regards to systemic skills,

respondents believed that motivation, quality, creativity and independent learning are the most important. For specific skills, the Spanish respondents believed that the most important is written and oral language proficiency, the mastery of foreign languages, and knowledge of foreign cultures and civilizations.

Finally, respondents were asked to add any special translation and interpreting skills related to public services not included in the questionnaire. The Spanish participants replied that they would add skills such as the ability to create glossaries and translation memories, knowledge of different types of texts and linguistic varieties, knowledge of language, arts and social science theory, knowledge of codes of conduct and ethics, and knowledge about sociological issues.

### **3.2 UK Responses**

In total, 13% of UK respondents were very satisfied with their training, 57% quite satisfied, 25% were indifferent, and 5% were not satisfied at all. The issues indicated concerning the training of UK participants also mainly related to the lack of practice during their courses. Respondents believed that classes had been more theoretical than practical and when starting work many felt unprepared. Respondents also claimed that little importance was given to specialisation, and thus they noted a lack of professional and interpersonal skills during their training courses. The respondents also highlighted the lack of specialisation of teachers, and a lack of training in the use of IT tools.

UK respondents agreed on many of the features they believed necessary in order to be a good translator or interpreter in public services, and emphasised the mastery of languages and fluency, empathy, professionalism, fairness, dependability, ability to work in a team, pleasant physical presence, concentration, alertness, precision, and interpersonal skills, etc. They also believed that it is essential to have a thorough knowledge of the cultures of the working languages, and to constantly develop and undertake further training. Furthermore, 56% of respondents added that it is important to have an understanding of public services.

In the UK, the instrumental skills which were most valued were oral and written communication in their own language, knowledge of a second foreign language, and the ability to manage information. UK respondents believed that the most important personal skills are the recognition of diversity and multiculturalism, ethical commitment, and the ability to work in an international context. In terms of systemic skills, the British respondents believed that knowledge about other cultures and customs, the ability to adapt to new situations and motivation are the most important. With regards to specific skills, respondents from the UK indicated that proficiency of technical and specialised terminology, mastery of foreign languages, and mastering interpreting techniques are the most important.

When respondents were asked whether they believed there were any other competences that had not been included, they noted that the competences listed in the survey were sufficient; however, 13% of respondents suggested adding the ability to manage stress and an understanding of the user's culture and religion. Finally, when respondents were asked to add any special translation and interpreting skills related to public services, 28% of the respondents did not understand the question or meaning of a specific competence, so they either did not reply or merely described generic skills. Those who did understand the question responded that it is necessary to add skills and knowledge resulting from exposure within different contexts, time management skills, and knowledge of ethical practices related to public services.

#### **4. CONCLUSIONS**

In Spain, the public services translator and interpreter is not yet a fully recognised professional figure, and without such recognition by society and institutions will not develop, with dedicated professionals finding it very difficult to develop their careers. Consequently, the training of these professionals is a major issue. It is necessary to create awareness of this profession and address the necessary changes, be it through formal university training or ad hoc training provided by associations or NGOs. Changes need to be made to the curriculum, methodology, objectives and competences so that

progress in the field and recognition of its professionals can be achieved. Many degrees in translation and interpreting at Spanish universities already have courses related to cultural mediation; however, these are not considered as important as other subjects, such as technical, literary or scientific translation. While many degree courses include legal or administrative translation, rarely are they geared towards public services and finding solutions to the linguistic problems of foreign residents. For this purpose, it is necessary to make pupils aware of the importance of understanding the culture and customs of the languages they study, and of the fact that in public services interpreting culture and language go hand in hand. This is only possible if more courses of this type are included in the curriculum.

There are many more courses in public services translation and interpreting at universities in the UK than in Spain. Moreover, the quality of courses in the UK is probably higher than in Spain because of the long tradition and recognition enjoyed by the profession. In addition, universities also offer continuing professional development courses and preparatory courses for specific PSIT exams.

It was observed that many students and professionals are not completely satisfied with the training they receive, indicating that much more needs to be done. All the deficiencies noted in the survey, such as the lack of practice or the short duration of courses need to be remedied. If students could increase the number of hours spent practicing, then they would be more likely to be ready to face the realities of work.

The importance of the competences included in the courses and degrees in translation and interpreting are fundamental for the training of good professionals. As mentioned earlier, schools and universities are key elements in enabling recognition of the profession. Transversal competences are those that are common to any degree, and therefore are expected of all professionals regardless of their speciality, whereas specific skills are related to each degree, and studies in translation and interpreting set specific competences for professional training. It is expected that all students should possess all the skills specified in the curriculum at the end of their studies,

yet in the case of PSIT, it is obvious that some skills are more important than others. These skills, related to knowledge of cultures and customs, and foreign languages, were the most valued by students and professionals from both Spain and the UK. Additional competences, including empathy skills towards other cultures, managing stress and emotions when in conflict situations, cultural sensitivity, social training, the ability to take notes and make glossaries, knowledge of specific terminology, knowledge of the functioning of public services, and knowledge of different types of texts and speeches, were highlighted among others.

It is clear that despite the development gap noted between Spain and the UK in terms of public services translation and interpreting, respondents from both countries agree on the importance of skills and the need to improve certain aspects of training courses and qualifications. All those involved in translation and interpreting, whether teachers, students, professionals or institutions, must be aware of the importance of training for the profession. This will ensure that quality services are available to foreign residents, the real beneficiaries of translation and interpreting in public services.

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