

# Trends in court interpreter training

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**I**nterpretation is a performing art similar, in a way, to figure skating. Figure skaters start their training at an early age, and it takes them years to reach the professional level. Interpreters learn and master their working languages for many years, even decades, if not for a lifetime.

Figure skaters know what technical and artistic elements need to be included in their programs. They practice for months and work tirelessly to incorporate them into a cohesive presentation. Yet very few can consistently perform at their highest level. Something could always be done better – this jump higher, the landing cleaner, this transition more effortless. Professional interpreters, likewise, are constantly improving and expanding their working vocabularies and their “collection” of semantic equivalents. They practice interpretation for years, mastering simultaneous and consecutive techniques, striving to deliver the most accurate and elegant target language (TL) counterpart of the original speech. But how many are capable of producing a perfect, flawless TL rendition at all times? Something could always be done better. A more precise word could be found, a more concise and efficient syntactical structure could be used, a more vivid idiom could be chosen.

There is one significant difference, though. It does not occur to any person who can merely skate to perform in a figure skating competition. Conversely, it is a routine occurrence when a bilingual person without special training serves as a language interpreter. This often takes place during extremely complex procedures that require the highest level of competency. Clumsy skating is obvious to everybody. Inept interpretation, on the other hand, is often only obvious to those who

are proficient in both languages. However, the consequences of poor interpretation are more devastating than of awkward figure skating. To be qualified for any competition, figure skaters undergo a rigorous screening. To be qualified as a court interpreter, it is often sufficient for an individual to claim that he or she is bilingual.

The need for qualified language interpreters in the United States legal and health care industries has been growing exponentially in the last decades. However, the opportunities for systematic and comprehensive interpreter training and education, especially for interpreters of languages other than Spanish, are in short supply. Due to the lack of national certification process for medical interpreters, the availability of reliable data on a professional qualification level is limited.

## Growing gap

According to the data published at the official website of US Courts ([www.uscourts.gov/newsroom/2010/CourtInterpretingEvents.cfm](http://www.uscourts.gov/newsroom/2010/CourtInterpretingEvents.cfm)), the number of federal court events requiring the use of interpreters increased by 11% in fiscal year 2009. US district courts reported that they used interpreters in 313,969 events, compared to the 282,733 events reported in FY 2008. Spanish remained the most-used language for interpreters by far, with 302,959 events – 96.5% of all reported events. The number of languages requiring interpretation increased from 113 in 2008 to 120 in 2009. Other frequently used languages were Mandarin (1,543 events), Vietnamese (987), Portuguese (776), Cantonese (733), Korean (618), Russian (594), Arabic (556), Haitian Creole (469) and Fochow (467).

No aggregate data is available on the number of court events requiring the use of interpreters at the state level across the United States. In 2006, courts in the state of Washington handled 71,321 cases that required an interpreter. In fiscal year 2004–2005, a total of 185,118 court interpreter service days were provided in the California courts for the 12 designated spoken languages. It would be safe to extrapolate that this number is well over a million nationwide. To assure some level of court interpreters’ competency, several certification examinations have been established on the federal and state levels (Table 1).



*Jinny Bromberg (left) and Irina Jesionowski are certified Russian court interpreters and codesigners of the Interpreter Education Online training program at the translation agency Bromberg & Associates.*



Certifying body	Languages	Passing score
Federal Court Interpreter Certification Examination	Spanish	80%
National Center for State Courts Testing Consortium (40 states)	Arabic, Arabic-Egyptian Colloquial, Cantonese, Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian, French, Haitian Creole, Hmong, Ilocano, Korean, Laotian, Mandarin, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Somali, Spanish, Turkish and Vietnamese	70%
California	In addition to the languages listed above, the Judicial Council of California also offers certification exams in Eastern Armenian, Western Armenian, Japanese and Tagalog languages.	80%

Table 1: Sample certification examination on federal and state levels.

However, the passing scores on the various examinations are designed to identify only a minimally competent interpreter, that is, minimally competent in each mode of interpreting. The Consortium exam allows a 30% error margin. Just imagine that a defendant receives only 70% of the information pertaining to his or her case, and almost a third of the information is either omitted or mistranslated. In addition, a real courtroom situation requires interpreters to work at a much higher level of difficulty than the one used for certification examination. In a courtroom, the rate of speech is considerably higher; the sentence structure, legal concepts and terminology are more complex; and consecutive segments are much longer and often nongrammatical.

Nancy Schweda Nicholson indicates in her article "The Court Interpreters Act of 1978: A 25-Year Retrospective" (*ATA Chronicle*, August 2005) that after a new version of the oral federal test was administered in April 2002, the pass rate became 22%. The data taken from the court interpreter testing databases maintained by

the New Jersey Judiciary shows that the passing rate in simultaneous interpretation ranges from 2% to 29% depending on the language combination.

In her research on the correlation between the availability of training and the passing rate, Wanda Romberger demonstrates that the passing rate is consistently higher in the states that offer interpretation skill building programs (<http://contentdm.ncsconline.org/cgi-bin/showfile.exe?CISOROOT=/accessfair&CISOPTR=31>). The trained interpreters in Connecticut have a substantially higher pass rate than the rest of the population (58% for the trained interpreters as compared to 19% for the rest). She observes, however, that the increased number of training hours does not lead to an automatic increase in passing rate. The percentage of successful examinees in Connecticut, which provides 16-hour training, is almost twice as high as in Idaho with 40-hour training. The research does not specify whether or not trainings offered by states have a language-specific component.

In 2008, Isabel Framer, then chairwoman of the National Association of Judiciary Interpreters and Translators, estimated that there were about 3,000 certified interpreters in the country ([www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2008-11-18-court-interpreters\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2008-11-18-court-interpreters_N.htm)). Of those, only 500 worked in languages other than Spanish.

Overall, we see a fairly grim picture. More than a million court interpretation events take place yearly in more than 120 languages while the certification process is established for less than 25 languages. Only about 3,000 certified interpreters are available countrywide, with the

majority of them living in metropolitan areas. Furthermore, over 70% of examinees, many of whom are practicing court interpreters, are unable to meet minimal certification requirements.

The gap between the need for competent court interpreters and their availability is tremendous. This gap continues to grow with the increase of the limited-English proficient population in the United States.

## Training options

Though there is no official data, it seems safe to assume that the vast majority of court interpreters are primarily self-taught. Individuals with a passion for languages learn about the justice system, research terminology, compile glossaries, and improve their interpretation skills using well-known resources for independent study. Some of those resources are the Federal Court Interpreter Certification Examination Kit, ACEBO by Holly Mikkelson and Interpretapes issued by University of Arizona. Independent study and short-term courses, seminars and workshops provided by professional associations, court administrations and some language companies are the most common "colors" of the "educational palette" available to legal interpreters. Very few language-specific training options are available, and they are overwhelmingly offered for the English <> Spanish language pair. Since so many self-taught interpreters with little additional training are so successful, possibly formal systematic training is overrated. Maybe Eugene Nida in *Towards a Science of Translating* is right believing that translators are born, not made.

Multiple studies prove this thesis to be wrong. As Daniel Gile states in *Basic Concepts and Models for Interpreter and Translator Training*, formal training helps interpreters to "enhance their performance to the full realization of their potential" and develop their professional skills more rapidly than through field experience and self-instruction, which may involve much groping in the dark and learning by trial-and-error."

It is much easier for self-proclaimed interpreters to gain access to the courtroom than it is for them to join an elite group of conference interpreters. Most interpreter education establishments in the world are geared towards conference interpretation in business and international settings. What educational options exist



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for language professionals serving the US justice system?

The Monterey Institute of International Studies (MIIS) and the College of Charleston offer interpretation and translation programs at a post-graduate level. The Graduate School of Translation, Interpretation and Language Education at MIIS offers world-renown training for language professionals. The languages offered for the MA degrees in Translation and Interpretation and Conference Interpretation are Chinese, French, German, Japanese, Korean, Russian and Spanish. While legal interpretation courses are incorporated into the school curriculum, court interpretation is not its primary specialization. MIIS is a major supplier of the highest quality conference interpreters and language professionals for government agencies as well as for international and business organizations. Completing the course requires a two-year relocation to Monterey (four semesters) and a steep monetary investment.

The MA degree in bilingual legal interpreting at the Graduate School of the College of Charleston offers the opportunity to receive the education and training required and expected of a professional degree-holding legal interpreter. The curriculum consists of 14 courses (42 credits) that can be completed over a two-year period. However, the program is offered only for the English <> Spanish language pair and mostly on campus. Riverside Community College in Moreno Valley, California, offers an associate in science degree in community interpretation in English <> Spanish.

The majority of educational organizations involved in court interpreter instruction offer certificate programs. Among them are California State University (Spanish and Vietnamese), University of California Los Angeles (Spanish, Korean and Mandarin), San Diego State University (Spanish), San Francisco State University (Spanish), Los Angeles Institute of Translation and Interpretation (Arabic, Armenian, Korean, Mandarin and Spanish), New York University School of Continuing and Professional Studies (Spanish), Boston University Center of Professional Education (Chinese, Portuguese and Spanish), Florida International University (Spanish), Brookdale Community College, New Jersey (Spanish), and Montclair State University, New Jersey (Spanish). All these programs are offered on campus only.

Two programs stand out in terms of completion feasibility for those students who are not able to relocate for months and years. Each summer, the University of Arizona's Agnese Haury Institute for Interpretation in Tucson offers an excellent intensive three-week course. Also, the Southern California School of Interpretation (SCSI), which has earned a great reputation among California professionals, offers a distance learning option in addition to a wide variety of on-site courses. However, again, both facilities provide instructions exclusively for Spanish interpreters.

On the whole, formal educational courses from associate degree and certificate programs to post-graduate level are offered by only a handful of colleges and universities, primarily in coastal states and mostly for Spanish interpreters. The majority of practicing and aspiring court interpreters has limited educational options. These include self-training, compact language-neutral courses offered by local and state court administrations

or by professional associations. Another alternative is relocation to the areas where formal education is available in the interpreter's language combination. The latter option is unattainable for the vast majority of working adults. In the meantime, the high standard of interpreter performance in any of the 120 languages spoken in courts should be upheld in any region of the United States. The chasm between the need for training and its availability has been flagrant.

## Distance education for court interpreters

The above sentiment has been a painful reality for many language service providers (LSPs) throughout the country. While some larger court systems are able to maintain their own interpretation departments, most courts rely on LSPs to supply legal interpreters, especially those working in languages of lesser diffusion. Therefore, LSPs are responsible for screening and training their contract interpreters, for conducting quality control and for dealing with professional liability issues.

The situation that the translation agency Bromberg & Associates found itself in could be a case study on what many LSPs face in terms of availability of competent contract interpreters. It is one of the major providers of court interpreters in southeast Michigan, with an assignment volume of hundreds per month. Requests for Spanish interpreters amount to about 40%, while other commonly requested languages are Arabic, Albanian, Slavic languages and Hmong. Many other languages are in demand, including those not tested by any certifying authority. In the meantime, just a handful of certified interpreters reside in metro Detroit. While assessing the qualifications of hundreds of candidates, it was determined that the competency level of the majority of applicants was inadequate. To combat the problem, Bromberg & Associates established internal training in a language-neutral format. While beneficial for beginners, this just scratched the surface. The company and its interpreters went searching for comprehensive, accessible and language-specific training. Two notable distance education choices are SCSI and de la Mora Interpreter Training.

SCSI offers a wide variety of short-term career training programs in medical, administrative hearings, and court



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interpreting comprised of several 13-hour modules. The Court Interpreter program includes four *Interpreting Criminal Proceedings* modules, two *Sight Translation* modules, and one *Interpreting in Municipal and Superior Court* module. Students can also take supplementary courses, such as *Advanced English and Spanish Syntax for the Oral Exam Interpreting*, *Advanced Consecutive Techniques* and more. While focusing on developing students' interpretation skills, increasing the speed of simultaneous interpretation and retention in the consecutive mode, the curriculum provides in-depth coverage of criminal and civil procedures and terminology. The distance option allows students to watch video lectures, access the audio practice lab, receive printed study materials and communicate with instructors. An oral assessment of the student's interpreting skills is conducted over the phone at the end of the course. SCSJ boasts, and deservedly so, that 85% of the candidates who become certified interpreters in California are the school's graduates. Without a doubt, the SCSJ is one of the most successful educational entities for legal interpreters. Unfortunately, as mentioned earlier, the only language combination offered for training is English <> Spanish.

Agustin de la Mora, a federally certified court interpreter and renowned interpreter trainer, offers online classes for groups of ten at the beginning, intermediate and advanced levels. Each course consists of six 90-minute online sessions conducted in real time. Participants chat one-on-one with the instructors from their homes or offices and are personally advised on how to better their skills. But, again, the program offers only the English <> Spanish or language-neutral options, and real-time sessions are prescheduled.

While these programs offer many opportunities to Spanish interpreters, none of them provides a sufficient scope of language pairs. The only remedy the team envisioned was to design its own training program. The course concept has been developed by practicing court interpreters and interpreter trainers. The curriculum design was based on a premise that a competent legal interpreter should have a master-level command of interpretation techniques, in-depth knowledge of the subject area and a profound understanding of professional ethics. Implementation

of this educational project required a multidisciplinary team. IT specialists have provided e-learning environments, and the chapters on legal concepts, specialized topics and court procedures were written by legal scholars, practicing attorneys, law enforcement and forensic professionals. A multilingual group of experienced interpreters, translators and voice-over talents dedicated countless hours to developing glossaries, interpretation exercises and terminology drills. The entire staff was enthusiastically acting in video segments on interpretation ethics and protocol.

Finally, after two years of hard work, the program was officially launched in 2009. Initially, training was offered in Arabic, French, Hmong, Mandarin, Polish, Russian, Spanish and Vietnamese. Instructions in Albanian, German and Portuguese have been added since. Currently, programs range from the advanced eight-unit course to single-topic units addressing specific fields of expertise court interpreters encounter in their practice. The curriculum consists of three major components. The subject-matter component includes legal concepts, areas of law, types of crime, stages of criminal procedure and special topics such as physical evidence, controlled substances, slang and jargon, autopsies, vehicular accidents and more. The second component is dedicated to court interpreter ethics and protocol. The

third part covers interpretation theory and practice. Each student is guided by two instructors, one of whom is language-neutral and the other is language-specific. All instructors are state or federally certified and experienced trainers. Some of the ultimate goals are for students to increase their "ready-to-use" arsenal of linguistic equivalents of special terminology and phraseology and to improve their interpretation performance.

Will distance learning become a fair substitute for on-site training? It remains to be seen. For many practicing and aspiring interpreters, an on-site option may never materialize. E-learning is the next best alternative, allowing them to benefit from comprehensive curriculum and mentoring. However, students involved in distance education need to be self-motivated, organized and disciplined. Multiple studies show that, unlike translators, interpreters are mostly extrovert learners who thrive in an environment that allows them to interact with their colleagues. Unfortunately, a certain degree of isolation is inherent to distant learning. Establishing forums and encouraging active communication could be a remedy for this impediment. What is absolutely clear, the language industry cannot ignore innovations and advantages offered by rapid development of electronic educational technologies. **M**

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