

Community Interpreter, Liaison Interpreter, ad hoc Interpreter, Intercultural Mediator...

What kind of curriculum for such a multifaceted profession?

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Abstract

The paper offers an overview of the mediator/interpreter profile in Italy today. The following aspects are tackled in detail: implementation of legislative tenets into academic training programmes with special reference to the Scuola Superiore di Lingue Moderne per Interpreti e Traduttori of Forlì – University of Bologna, a description of the curriculum offered and its evaluation through a questionnaire distributed to 240 students, and a proposal for a curriculum that takes into account the present working and educational requirements. Given the recent regulation of the profession and the freshly introduced University reform providing specific training, the paper ends with several open questions highlighting the implications of the present trends.

Résumé

Cet article offre une vue d'ensemble du profil du médiateur/interprète aujourd'hui, en Italie, à partir des dispositions législatives jusqu'aux exigences du marché du travail. On aborde, dans le détail, les aspects suivants : le cadre légal italien, l'application des principes législatifs dans les programmes de formation académique, et en particulier dans la Scuola Superiore di Lingue Moderne per Interpreti e Traduttori de Forlì – Université de Bologna, une description du curriculum offert aussi bien que son évaluation à travers un questionnaire distribué à 240 étudiants, avec une proposition de curriculum qui considère les nécessités et les exigences actuelles au niveau du travail et de l'éducation. À partir de la réglementation récente de la profession d'interprète et de la réforme de l'université récemment adoptée et qui prévoit une formation spécifique, l'article se termine avec de nombreuses questions ouvertes qui mettent en évidence les problèmes et les retombées de l'évolution actuelle.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to offer an overview of the mediator/interpreter profile in Italy today. The following aspects will be presented: implementation of legislative tenets into academic training programmes with special reference to the Scuola Superiore di Lingue Moderne per Interpreti e Traduttori (SSLMIT) of Forlì – University of Bologna (§ 1), curriculum offered (§ 2), students' evaluation (§ 3), curriculum suggested (§ 4), conclusions or, rather, open questions (§ 5).

1. Ministerial provisions and academic training

Only in 1998 was the provision of linguistic support for ethnic minorities through intercultural mediators officially recognised by Law 40/98 which further regulated immigration and, in general, the status of foreigners in Italy. However, training courses for intercultural mediators already started in the early '90s thanks to local authorities (Regions, Provinces, Municipalities), migrants' associations, NGOs and non profit companies, mostly with the financial support of the European Social Fund. These training courses were offered to immigrants who, sharing the cultural background of the linguistic-ethnic minorities who needed interpreting services, would act as "bridges" between the host culture and theirs. Associations and agencies of intercultural mediators were mainly set up in Northern and Central Italy. Today intercultural mediators are needed in public services, especially in schools, social and health services all across the country (Belpiede 2002). There is also a strong demand for mediators in legal settings, such as police stations and courts.

Given the large public and private demand for professional mediators, the need was felt to offer university training in "Scienze della mediazione linguistica" (Sciences of linguistic mediation): a theoretical framework for a new 3-year first level University degree.¹ According to the qualifying objectives set for this new degree, graduates must:

- have a sound cultural and linguistic background in at least two languages, besides Italian, and their cultures;
- have a strong linguistic-technical competence, both oral and written;
- have adequate general knowledge in the following fields: economic-legal, historical-political, socio-anthropological and literary;
- master communication and information technology tools;
- have an adequate knowledge of the problems and main features of different working environments (public institutions, industries and other agencies operating in the field of culture, tourism, environment and so on) linked to specific geographic areas, and of their potential development, with particular reference to inter-ethnic and intercultural dynamics;
- be able to organise themselves autonomously and to rapidly adjust to work circumstances.

To achieve the above-mentioned objectives, curricula must include:

- linguistic activities to strengthen oral and written competence in Italian and other foreign languages and to provide background knowledge for interlinguistic and intercultural mediation;
- introductory courses on translation of texts related to business and institutional activities and introductory courses in interpreting focussing on memory exercises, sight translation and note-taking;
- courses on economics and law, besides other subject-matters related to the specific geographical area where the institution is located;
- teaching practices in companies, institutions and universities in Italy and abroad.

Prospective employers of these graduates are private companies and public institutions.

In the academic year 2001/2 the University reform introducing this new degree was implemented and today there are 30 universities plus other private higher education institutions offering a plethora of degrees and a few masters within this new educational framework. Their designations and curricula differ substantially according to the specific qualifications granted. Some degree designations clearly indicate the field of application of the interlinguistic and/or intercultural mediation training like, for instance, like “Lingue per la mediazione linguistica” (“Languages for linguistic mediation”, Univ. of Cagliari) or “Esperto linguistico per l’impresa” (Linguistic expert for enterprises”, Univ. of Ragusa). Other degree designations are more generic, like for instance “Linguaggi multimediali e informatica umanistica” or “Traduzione e interpretazione per usi linguistici speciali” (“Multimedia languages and humanistic information technology”, “Translation and Interpretation for languages for special purposes”, Univ. of Napoli).

As the regulation of this profession is fairly recent if compared, for instance, to conference interpreting, the terminology defining it is far from standardised (see Niska 2002: 134 and n.1 and Gentile et al. 1996: 17). However, in Italy the following basic terminological distinction has taken root: a “*mediatore (inter)culturale*” is a trained immigrant who has been living in our country for a sufficient number of years and corresponds to a “community interpreter” (according to the definitions for such a professional profile used by many authors, see for instance Wadensjö 1998 and Niska 2002), whereas an “*interprete di trattativa*” is a trained graduate and corresponds to a “liaison interpreter” (as defined by Gentile et al. 1996) or to an “*intérprete de enlace*” (as defined by Collados Aís and Fernández Sánchez 2001), who not necessarily belongs to the same ethnic group as the client and operates also in business settings. The former is active in educational, social, health and legal settings and the latter in business, social, health and legal settings. So far, academic training in Sciences of linguistic mediation has involved hundreds of Italian students who become interpreters in different fields, depending on the market outlets (legal setting, health, business etc.). The exception is the course for immigrants offered by the University of Siena with an extremely qualified curriculum. On the other hand, non academic training in cultural-linguistic mediation has involved immigrants, namely members of the cultural minorities living in our country. The target trainee population of these two training programmes differs greatly in terms both of age and status, with all the personal and professional implications that this involves: young graduate (mainly Italian) students vs (mainly adult) immigrants.

With the new profile of liaison interpreter, higher education enters a field that for over a decade has been catered for by other public and private bodies, as no specific academic training existed. This poses a real challenge for universities.

2. Curriculum of the SSLMIT of Forlì

The specific training objectives of the SSLMIT curriculum are inspired by the national legislation and are laid down in art. 3 of the Teaching regulations (my translation):

“The curriculum of the course was conceived to create a professional profile (“Traduttore e interprete di trattativa”, liaison translator and interpreter) with high translating and linguistic competence for written, oral and multimedia communication. These skills are to be developed in sectors related to economy, legislation, trade, science and technology and intercultural exchanges, and they are directly employable in public and private companies, national and international bodies or institutions and in a free-lance professional activity. [...]”

The 3-year course (180 credits) is based on the following study plan: core subjects (Italian language and literature, language and culture of the foreign countries chosen by the student and principles of general and applied linguistics), specific subjects (linguistic mediation between the languages chosen by

the students), supplementary and optional subjects (economics, law, history, sociology, geography, information technology, knowledge of a third language, practical training).

Mediation classes are envisaged for each of the 3 years and the courses are called: “*Mediazione linguistica*” (Linguistic Mediation) in the 1st year, “*Interpretazione di trattativa I*” (Liaison Interpreting) in the 2nd and “*Interpretazione di trattativa II*” in the 3rd. Each linguistic department organised course contents and exams independently, but the need arose for more inter-department coordination among all trainers involved. So in the academic year 2002/3 several meetings were held in order to compare and discuss teaching approaches and programmes. A lively debate leading to the teaching proposal outlined in §4 developed. Considerable differences did emerge but all agreed that the present course format with two trainers (Italian and foreign language speakers) for at least two thirds of the course was extremely successful. These were trainers’ considerations, but what about students’ opinions of the courses offered?

3. Students’ evaluation of the curriculum

Emidio Zillante’s graduation thesis discussed in the academic year 2002/03 provides an interesting insight into the curriculum currently offered at the SSLMIT from the students’ point of view.

He distributed 240 questionnaires to students (29 males and 211 females, mean age 20.5) attending the courses of linguistic mediation and liaison interpreting of all language combinations offered by the School.

The questionnaire contained 7 sections:

- a. *Personal data*;
- b. *Induction exercises to interpreting* (concentration, recall, text analysis, transformation of written into oral texts, writing a text based on a dialogue, closing, exercises with figures, memorisation, sight translation, lexicon/style/register exercises, public speaking, stress control, periodical testing);
- c. *Interpreting exercises* (this part was conceived to assess the frequency of class attendance and of independent exercise as well as how lessons are organised);
- d. *Feedback* (type and frequency of trainer’s comments on student’s performance and of remedial exercises);
- e. *Teaching material* (interviews, specialised texts, video recordings);
- f. *Preparation* (duration and type of student’s preparation for classes),
- g. *Overall evaluation* (lessons and trainer’s approach).

Students were asked to evaluate each item on a 1-to-5 point scale, ranging from “never” to “always” (sections b-f) and from “insufficient” to “excellent” (section g). Furthermore, free comments were invited at the end of section g.

Since the results were obtained for individual courses and for each language combination, only the general results highlighted in the conclusions by the author (Zillante 2002: IX-XX) will be provided here. *Induction exercises* are frequently performed especially in the first two years, as expected, mainly as sight translation. The other exercises are less frequently performed which is to be regretted as they -if regularly practised- strengthen the ability to concentrate, analyse, memorise, speak fluently and keep one’s anxiety at bay (ib: XII).

As to *interpreting exercises*, the presence of two trainers working simultaneously with the same group is a regular and appreciated feature for this type of lessons. Furthermore, students tend to be actively involved most of the time and this draws the best out of them as they feel really useful in the communication process, despite the artificial setting of the classroom which is partially neutralised by the

valuable presence of real foreigners (Socrates exchange students). Unfortunately, students declare to practice very little outside regular lessons. This means that students' sense of responsibility and self-awareness of their own shortcomings have to be constantly fostered.

Students acknowledge trainers' frequent *feedback*, which is mostly perceived as critically constructive (146 vs 28). As to students' main weaknesses, grammar mistakes and lexically inappropriate choices are the most frequent items and, in the first year, poor source language comprehension is still frequently detected. When asked to single out their main difficulties, students mention appropriate lexicon, reformulation and memorisation exercises.

As to *teaching material*, texts on current affairs are the most frequently used. Interviews and specialised texts are also used, especially in the 3rd year.

Students devote very few hours a week to *prepare* for classes and they are not systematic in doing so. To achieve best results, part of interpreters' training should therefore involve lessons on how to prepare for a specific subject and how to process documents and compile glossaries.

As to *overall evaluation*, students are more satisfied in the 2nd and 3rd years, probably because in the 1st year they encounter more difficulties related to poor foreign language competence and to the novelty of the training exercises (ib: XVIII).

In the "free comment" section (section g), among the most useful exercises students included: memory exercises, role-playing, sight translation, public speaking and recall. On the other hand, the most frequently criticised features were: size of the group in the classroom, scant use of specialised language and glossaries and insufficient real practise outside the academic setting. Apparently, the practical training of several months already envisaged by the curriculum is deemed insufficient by the trainees, thus indicating their genuine concern to be up to the challenges posed by the labour market.

4. Curriculum suggested

The following training proposal is the result of the joint effort to take stock of the present working and educational requirements and is based on an exchange of experiences and opinions between the teachers of linguistic mediation and liaison interpreting at the Forlì SSLMIT, coordinated by my colleague Gabriele Mack and myself.²

Proposal for a 3-year training course

	Objectives	Practical and Theoretical Skills	Main topics	Minimal Exam Components*
<p>Mediazione linguistica (Linguistic mediation)</p> <p>1st year (in collaboration with the courses of Language, History and Culture)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Development of oral and written competence in languages A and B, especially into B. - Development of preliminary skills of inter-linguistic oral mediation (analysis of the communicative situation and speakers interaction, 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Understand oral texts - Produce prepared and unprepared speeches in language B - Expand general lexicon and control register and style in languages A and B, autonomy in finding documents - Analyse and 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Current affairs - Institutions of language A and B countries and EU institutions - Geography of language A and B countries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Listening/ Comprehension of language B speeches - Production of prepared and unprepared speeches in language B - Interpretation of straightforward dialogues and interviews B>A and A>B

	detection of speaker's communicative intention and key concepts, contents organisation and production)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> summarise oral speeches - Concentrate and memorise - Produce and interpret straightforward dialogues - Prepare for a topic and draw up glossaries - Awareness of one's own and foreign cultures 		- Intra-linguistic recall of a 3' speech
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*(possibly, periodical and videorecorded tests)

	Objectives	Practical and Theoretical Skills	Main topics	Minimal Exam Components*
<p>Trattativa I (Liaison interpreting)</p> <p>2nd year (in collaboration with the courses of Translation, Law, Economics and History)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Strengthening of 1st year oral and written competences - Consolidation of skills in inter-linguistic oral mediation (analysis of the communicative situation and speakers interaction, detection of speaker's vouloir dire and key concepts, contents organization and production) - Development of the ability to professionally manage inter-linguistic and intercultural communicative situations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Understand oral texts - Produce prepared and unprepared speeches in language B - Expand specialised lexicon and control register and style in languages A and B, finding and processing documents - Prepare glossaries - Analyse and summarise oral texts - Concentrate and memorise - Interpret more complex dialogues and simple inter-linguistic business negotiations - Perform sight translation - Public speaking and stress management ability - Professional ethics and role - Form/Types of mediations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Current affairs - Economics and Business - Tourism - Corporations and Trade Fairs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Presentation of a technical bilingual glossary in language B - Interpretation of longer and more complex dialogues: B>A and A>B - Inter-linguistic recall of a 5' speech

*(possibly, periodical and videorecorded tests)

	Objectives	Practical and Theoretical Skills	Main topics	Minimal Exam Components*
<p>Trattativa II (Liaison interpreting)</p> <p>3° anno (3rd year (in collaboration with the courses of Translation, Languages for special purposes and, possibly, teaching practices)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Strengthening of skills and competencies acquired in the 2nd year - Basic note-taking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Understand oral texts - Produce prepared and unprepared speeches in language B - Expand specialised lexicon and control register and style in languages A and B, autonomy in finding and processing documents - Analyse and summarise oral texts - Concentrate and memorise - Interpret more complex dialogues and straightforward inter-linguistic business negotiations; role-plays - Perform sight translation - Perform telephone interpreting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Current affairs - Specialised economic sectors - Social and health services - Police and court interpreting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Presentation of a study and a bilingual glossary on one of the topics dealt with during the year - Sight translation: B>A and A>B - Interpretation of more complex dialogues: B>A and A>B

*(possibly, periodical and videorecorded tests)

7. Conclusions, or rather, Open Questions

Since the early '90s the role of the cultural mediator in Italy has been performed by immigrants, most of whom had received ad hoc training by local authorities and associations. They have traditionally been involved in education, health, legal and social services.

With Law n. 40/98 they have received legal recognition and an "official incentive" to be hired by public services in order to facilitate communication and bridge the gap between foreigners and Italian service providers and/or authorities.

With the recent academic reform of 2001, the new 3-year degree in Sciences of Linguistic Mediation has been introduced, thus offering a qualification to hundreds of Italian students who will hopefully find jobs as liaison interpreters/linguistic mediators in health, legal, social services and business settings. The basic objective of the curricula approved by the Education Authorities is to develop a professional profile that encompasses linguistic, cultural and technical competence and sound background knowledge in those fields that are relevant for community and business settings.

The Forlì SSLMIT curriculum mirrors this comprehensive approach and students seem to be favourably impressed with it, especially as they approach the last year of training.

Yet, the needs of both employers and professionals on the field are manifold and must be catered for in an academic curriculum as best as possible. Among them, the need for terminological and specialised training and for stress management and psychological support is particularly felt, as emerged during the conference held at the SSLMIT of Forlì on February 14th 2003 whose proceedings will appear soon (Russo and Mack, forthcoming, *L'interpretazione di trattativa. La mediazione linguistico-culturale nel contesto della formazione e della professione*)³.

Against this backdrop, several questions arise: Will a 3-year course be long enough to cater for the many training and psychological demands linked to the profession? Will the present academic training give rise to a two-tier system in the field, with immigrants generally unable to attend the courses offered, due to difficulties in having their diplomas recognised, excessive duration of programmes, need for financial support, etc.?

University graduates as liaison interpreters and immigrants as cultural mediators: Will their respective functions overlap in most fields? If so, what chances do the two groups have to receive the same level of training? Is it feasible to expect that cultural competence in two other cultures besides the Italian one is going to be achieved in 3 years by Italian undergraduates?

Pending enlightening answers that only the evolution of the Italian marketplace and of the training supply will provide, I would like to conclude with a quotation from Luka (forthcoming) "In order to be effective in human communication, it's absolutely necessary to build relationships". What better training principle for interpreters/mediators?

¹ Definition of the classes of University degrees, Ministerial Decree 4/8/2000, http://www.miur.it/0006Menu_C/0012Docume/0015Atti_M/0029Determ_cf2.htm.

² I wish to thank and give credit to all the colleagues who took part in these meetings and contributed to the debate: Luisa Cotta, Ulrike Kaunzner, Natalia Kardanova, Cecilia Pozzi, Isabel Fernández, Gloria Bazzocchi, Mariapia Rossi, Marie-Line Zucchiatti, Allan Bennett, Rachel Pearce, Elena Tomassini, Mette Rudvin, Adriana Villamena, Nadia Pagani, Chris Garwood, Elio Ballardini, Annalisa Sandrelli, Raquel Moreno, María Luz Cámara, María Jesús González, Alberto Zamboni and Elena Di Concilio.

³ Alongside academics and trainers from all over the country who shared their most valuable reflections and teaching experiences, professionals of both sides, namely users and interpreters provided a fresh insight into the Italian market.

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