

Professional community interpreting in a turbulent world: A necessity or a luxury?

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Abstract

In this article, we delve into the history, background, development and essence of the community interpreting training process run by the Institute of Translation Studies at Charles University. With the outbreak of the migration crisis in 2022, community interpreting became a highly needed service, and as an academic institution, we had to shift our priorities and rapidly respond to this new situation. In this paper, we share our findings and initiatives and raise several questions that arose during the emergency and are yet to be answered. Some of them are directly related to the training process, while others have a much broader scope and require cooperation with state institutions, NGOs, and other stakeholders. This descriptive study not only maps the current approach and teaching trends in the Institute of Translation Studies but also aspires to draw out possible scenarios for further development in the field of community interpreting, including training. One of the key topics we assess is how to find the right balance among professional, non-professional, and ad hoc interpreting services in the short and long term while maintaining an adequate quality of interpreting.

Molchan, Maria and Čeňková, Ivana. 2023. Professional community interpreting in a turbulent world: A necessity or a luxury? In: *Bridge: Trends and Traditions in Translation and Interpreting Studies*. Vol. 4, No. 1: pp. 109-122.

1. Introduction

Lately, many aspects of life in our world have been changing rapidly. New conflict zones have emerged in the past few years, and interpreter trainers in Central Europe have faced a new challenge stemming from the massive influx of Ukrainian refugees. This has resulted in a need to provide refugees with social and medical services on the one hand, and a severe lack of interpreters (professional and non-professional) who could cover this sudden demand for interpreting services on the other. This article focuses on the response of the Institute of Translation Studies (*Ústav translatologie*, hereinafter also referred to as *ÚTRL*) at the Faculty of Arts, Charles University in regard to community interpreter training within the institution and beyond.

2. Background

Before 1989, due to the political regime, only foreigners from certain countries were allowed to relocate to and settle in Czechoslovakia. It was only after the fall of communism and the opening of the labour market that a wave of immigration to Czechoslovakia, and later the Czech Republic, began. This triggered a demand for community interpreting services. However, up until now, these services have mainly been provided by NGOs, and to our best knowledge, no professional institution uniting community interpreters is currently operating. Furthermore, there is no state institution that monitors or regulates the work of community interpreters, certifies them, or provides training.

The teaching of community interpreting in the Czech Republic has an even shorter history. In 2000, the Institute of Translation Studies at Charles University initiated the first discussions between interpreting and translation agencies and *ÚTRL* staff to address the unique aspects of interpreting for asylum seekers, as well as the potential for interpreting services between Czech and underrepresented languages. This led to the publication of the first Czech article on this topic (Čeňková 2001), as well as the presentation of papers on community interpreting at specialized translation and interpreting conferences at Czech universities. The Czech term *komunitní tlumočení* (community or public service interpreting¹) was also first used in 2001 at a conference held in the country. This marked the recognition of the need to include community interpreting in interpreter training.

Subsequently, in 2007-2008, a grant was provided by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport of the Czech Republic to develop a lifelong learning course in community interpreting, which was presented at an

¹ https://inbaze.cz/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/cesko_anglicky-slovník-pro-interkulturní-práci.pdf.

international round table organized by the Czech Union of Interpreters and Translators. Since 2009, the course has been regularly offered to the general public, with the aim of providing specialized training to individuals who are interested in pursuing a career in community interpreting (www.lingua.ff.cuni.cz).

In 2012 and 2015, an intensive full-term course on community interpreting was organized for META, o.p.s., a Czech NGO. This marked the beginning of a long-term collaboration between the Institute of Translation Studies at Charles University and several Czech NGOs, including META, o.p.s., InBáze, z.s., Integration Centre Prague, SIMI, OPU, Slovo 21 and others. This collaboration was aimed at training community interpreters and intercultural workers in a multilingual and bilingual environment.

Since 2012, we have been regularly facilitating longer and shorter courses, seminars, and interpreter-training workshops that are customized to meet the specific needs and requirements of various non-profit organizations and civic associations. Our focus is on their intercultural workers and interpreters, many of whom are foreigners themselves. In addition, most of the above-listed non-profit organizations regularly engage our students to provide interpreting services as part of their mandatory interpreting practice, which is included in the specialization's accreditation at the Institute of Translation Studies.

In recognition of the growing demand for community interpreting services, two new elective subjects were introduced in the curriculum of the Interpreting Master's program at Charles University in 2012: *Community Interpreting* and *Bilateral Interpreting*. These subjects are held every two years and are aimed at providing advanced training to students who are interested in working in community interpreting. The overall duration spans four semesters, with two academic hours per week dedicated to theoretical lectures and practical training.

In addition to practical training and interpreting theory, students also conduct research in community interpreting. Although this topic is not the most popular among students, a number of solid diploma theses on community interpreting have been successfully defended at Charles University, serving as a foundation for further research in this field. Some noteworthy examples highlight the role and position of community interpreters, interpreting in Labour Offices, healthcare institutions, schools, public administration facilities, refugee centres, etc. (refer to the list of defended theses in the "References" section).

3. Teaching community interpreting at the Institute of Translation Studies: a short overview of the training process

In this section, we provide a short overview of the practical aspects of the training process, including pre-event preparation, event organization, and post-event feedback and assessment. Alongside practical

exercises, we also conduct a series of theoretical lectures covering topics such as community interpreting theory, community interpreting ethics, the role of the interpreter, etc. However, in this section, we will focus solely on the practical side of the process.

The pre-event phase involves theme-based preparation, terminology preparation, and analysis of the interpreting situation based on a short description of the scenario and the client's needs. The students receive the topic in advance (e. g. social support for pregnant women, enrollment for kindergarten, GP visit) with a list of relevant terminology in Czech and are expected to do basic research on the relevant process in the Czech Republic and create a glossary (some glossaries are already available online²). Additionally, students are required to assess the relevant forms to be completed (e. g. application for unemployment benefits) in order to ensure that they are fully prepared for the event.

Community interpreting training at the Institute of Translation Studies is based on the use of semi-structured scripts. Students are divided into pairs in advance. Each pair of students receives a brief description of a scenario in advance and has to prepare a dialogue (for courses for the general public and NGOs, the scripts are prepared by instructors). Students are not given access to other pairs' scripts before the class to ensure genuine dialogue.

The event itself involves a role-play performance, with interruptions designed to identify and remedy severe problems based on peer feedback and the instructor's feedback (unlike the courses for NGOs, we consider one instructor to be enough for these groups of students). During the pre-event preparation phase and role-play, students are expected to apply the knowledge and skills learned at consecutive interpreting courses, and to adapt to unforeseen circumstances that may arise during the interpreting process.

In the advanced stages of community interpreting training, we ask students to deliberately include extralinguistic challenges in their scripts. These challenges can include a range of emotional and social situations, such as dealing with clients who are rude, arrogant, or attempting to bribe an official. By including these extralinguistic challenges in their scripts, students become better prepared to handle the rougher, less friendly environment that they may encounter in real-life interpreting situations. This type of training helps students to develop the emotional intelligence

² 1. https://inbaze.cz/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/cesko_ukrajinsky-slovník-pro-interkulturni-praci.pdf.

2. https://inbaze.cz/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/cesko_rusky-slovník-pro-interkulturni-praci.pdf.

3. https://inbaze.cz/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/cesko_anglicky-slovník-pro-interkulturni-praci.pdf.

and resilience needed to navigate difficult situations and maintain their professionalism and integrity.

In addition to preparing students for challenging interpersonal dynamics, including extralinguistic challenges in their scripts also helps to reinforce the importance of cultural awareness and sensitivity in community interpreting. By exposing students to a range of cultural norms and expectations, we help students become better equipped to understand and navigate the complex social and cultural dynamics that can arise in cross-cultural communication.

Post-event feedback and assessment is a critical component of the training process. After the role-play performance, there is a group discussion where students have the opportunity to share their experiences and receive feedback from their peers and instructor. All actors are invited to briefly share their observations, praise, and criticism.

It is understandable that the reality of the interpreting market in the Czech Republic presents challenges for graduates who aspire to work in community interpreting. The low fees, lack of prestige, challenging work environment, and limited professional growth opportunities make it difficult for individuals to pursue a long-term career in this field.³

It is encouraging that university students are actively seeking opportunities to improve their interpreting skills through community interpreting jobs, but it is concerning that few see it as a viable long-term career option (though absolutely understandable from a practical point of view). Even the role-plays within the *Community Interpreting* and *Bilateral Interpreting* courses are perceived as overwhelming by some students, who feel more comfortable in a booth or in a standard consecutive interpreting environment.

With regard to these issues, we have to explore options for training community interpreters outside the institution to meet the demand for these services. By taking an active role in providing training and support to individuals interested in community interpreting, we as university trainers can help to bridge the gap between the demand for interpreters and the limited supply of trained professionals in the market.

4. Teaching community interpreting to NGOs and the general public

In this section, we present the main differences in the training process between university and non-university environments. The core of the training remains the same – role-play. However, given that the vast majority of our audience in the non-university environment does not have

³ It is worth noting that court interpreting is not perceived as a part of community interpreting in the Czech Republic, and certified court interpreters very rarely engage in every day community interpreting.

an interpreter training background, some adjustments are called for. It is worth mentioning that at the beginning of the course, we stress that attending our course will not make participants professional interpreters, and they cannot aspire to a strong competitive position in the market without further proper training.

For the NGO course, we always have two instructors, ideally native speakers of the relevant languages who are professional interpreters themselves. They prepare the scripts (or rather improvise based on the key points of a scenario) and act as clients during the role-play. Usually, we are limited to a two full-day intensive course and cannot expect any pre-event preparation from the participants. Unlike university students, the NGO course participants, as a rule, do have some practical experience with the topics, as many of them are migrants who have gone through the procedures themselves and are familiar with the environments and their challenges. However, this familiarity sometimes works as an obstacle to their interpreting performance due to emotional engagement, lack of impartiality, or overconfidence.

The participants do not receive any preparation materials (except for online glossaries) and attend to simply practice interpreting. The training itself, especially the feedback, takes on a much different form than the one we give at the university. Our participants usually have either zero or very limited note-taking skills, and we actively encourage them to master at least very basic note-taking techniques. They also lack basic interpreter skills, such as anticipation, summarization, and identifying the core of the utterance. Therefore, we are not trying to train full-fledged interpreters but rather to eliminate the most severe mistakes and provide as many practical strategies and tips as possible in a very limited time span.

5. War in Ukraine: a change of paradigm

February 24, 2022, was not only a crucial moment for European security but also presented several significant challenges in the field of community interpreting. Due to the massive influx of Ukrainian refugees (around 0.5 million)⁴, particularly in the early stages of the war, demand for interpreting services, especially community interpreting, skyrocketed by thousands of percent.

The Czech government responded to the crisis almost immediately and opened Regional Assistance Centers for Aid to Ukraine ("KACPU"s) on March 1 in all the regional capitals, with the largest one in Prague at the Congress Center building (opened March 4 after moving from the Municipal Library in Prague). The Prague branch received up to 3,000 refugees per

⁴ As of April 1, 2023, Czechia had 325,000 Ukrainian refugees, according to the Ministry of interior (<https://www.mvcr.cz/clanek/v-ceske-republice-je-aktualne-325-tisic-uprchliku-z-ukrajiny.aspx>).

day (in March and April 2022) and engaged up to 700 volunteer interpreters per week in day and night shifts (6-8 hours per shift, i.e., approximately 25 interpreters per shift) (Čeňková 2023). All Russian-speaking interpreting trainers at the Institute of Translation Studies also joined the pool of volunteer interpreters, firstly as helpers, and secondly as instructors who needed to get first-hand information and experience in a completely new setting with an aspiration to incorporate this new situation into our training process.

NGOs played a crucial role in securing such high numbers of volunteer interpreters. Integration Centre Prague created a database of volunteer interpreters (which includes a total of about 1,800 people) and coordinated shift assignments. InBáze, z.s. and Slovo 21 made their terminology glossaries available to the public and quickly compiled new Ukrainian and Russian glossaries. Slovo 21 also contacted the Institute of Translation Studies and the Department of East European Studies at the Faculty of Arts at Charles University almost immediately, requesting that crash courses on community interpreting be arranged for the general public, in order to provide at least basic training for those who volunteered at KACPU.

Subsequently, three crash courses on community interpreting, each lasting one half-day, were organized (two courses on March 18, 2022 and one on April 21, 2022). A total of 100 participants attended the courses, including altogether 75 participants in the Czech-Russian courses, and 25 participants in the Czech-Ukrainian course. Most of the participants in the training were students of the Faculty of Arts at Charles University. The training was specifically tailored to the needs of the volunteer interpreters at KACPU and covered only three topics, which correlated to three "stations" attended by the refugees on arrival (Foreign Police/Department for Asylum and Migration Policy, health insurance company, and Labour Office). The participants also learned about the Code of Ethics and the role of an interpreter. Through role-play, we simulated real situations that we as interpreters had personally encountered at KACPU, and discussed recommended and possible strategies and solutions.

We also highly encouraged our university students to join the pool of volunteer interpreters, and we know that some helped not only in Prague but also in their home regions. In spring 2022, the students made two short "training videos" for volunteer interpreters, in which they explain the role of an interpreter, what community interpreting is, what the Code of Ethics is and how to comply with it, and how to handle emotionally difficult situations, etc. These videos were made available at the KACPU in Prague and in the regions, as well as on the websites of participating organizations.

6. The situation in relation to the war in Ukraine

University students have both advantages and disadvantages as community interpreters. On the positive side, they are professionals in the making, with a solid command of both languages and advanced interpreting skills. They also have knowledge of interpreting ethics and are eager to accept community interpreting jobs as an opportunity to enhance their skills.

However, there are also significant drawbacks to relying on university students for community interpreting. First and foremost, the number of students and fresh graduates cannot by any means satisfy the high demand for interpreters, especially during times of crisis. Additionally, the low fees and less prestigious nature of community interpreting jobs can result in poor motivation among students. Altruistic enthusiasm, boosted by an emergency situation, does not last long for most students, and as a rule, they are only involved in community interpreting on a short-term basis. It is safe to assume that their attitude towards community interpreting mostly depends on their perception of interpreting as a profession, meaning whether they are inclined to categorize interpreting as a helping profession or not, and this attitude may considerably differ among students.

Of course, in times of war, such considerations as fees and prestige become irrelevant. For a few months, professional, student, non-professional and ad hoc interpreters all turned into volunteer interpreters, and there was no distinction made among them at KACPU, at least in Prague.

Non-professional and ad hoc interpreters, such as those who volunteer at refugee assistance centers like KACPU, and especially the ones who work as community interpreters or intercultural workers with NGOs on a permanent basis, have some distinct advantages in comparison to professional interpreters and university students. They are highly motivated and there is a strong chance that they have personal experience as clients within community interpreting situations. As a result, they have more advanced empathy skills and a more mature and grounded approach to life situations. Furthermore, unlike many professional interpreters and university students, they view community interpreting as a helping profession. Last but not least: there are higher numbers of non-professional interpreters available, which can be especially helpful in emergency situations.

Despite all of the above, the quality of interpretation provided by non-professional interpreters can be questionable and may vary from excellent to absolutely unacceptable, especially in the case of ad hoc interpreters. At KACPU no one checks the level of volunteers' language or interpreting skills. Non-professional interpreters and certified intercultural workers who cooperate with NGOs on a long-term basis have a stable and solid performance within the topics they regularly work with. However, there

were not enough of them even before the war, and with the outbreak of the crisis, the situation has further deteriorated.

Without proper training and experience, non-professional interpreters, especially ad hoc interpreters, may struggle with many aspects of interpreting. Therefore, while they can be a valuable resource, it is important to ensure that they receive some, even very short, entry training (e. g. a crash course) and that their work is monitored and reviewed to maintain at least basic standards of interpretation.

7. To be or not to be a professional (community) interpreter?

For professional interpreters and university trainers, this is a difficult situation to accept. We would prefer that all community interpreting needs be covered by professional interpreters to ensure a high standard of services, liability, ethical approach and the good name of the profession, etc. are maintained. However, in the field of community interpreting, and especially in times of crisis, this idea is unrealistic (Mikkelsen 2004). Therefore, it is worth considering the following prospects (we do not intend to offer any concrete and final solutions as each of these topics deserves separate in-depth study):

1. Short-term and long-term approaches (non-war and war situations and solutions):

In the short term, some focus should be placed on effective emergency measures such as developing a rapid response system to deploy interpreters to crisis situations. One of the most obvious responses from academia would be to offer crash interpreting courses for ad hoc interpreters, which should ideally be mandatory. In the long term, efforts should be made to improve language education and training programs, including specialized training for non-professional community interpreters.

2. Securing a sufficient number of community interpreters of adequate quality:

If we accept the fact that professional interpreters won't suffice to cover the needs of the community interpreting segment, the focus should be on securing a sufficient number of – let's call them interpreters of adequate quality. This number can fluctuate depending on the needs of a particular moment. However, it is clear that professional training cannot serve as the only eligibility criterion to enter this field.

3. Should we attract candidates to the academic environment? Or should academia reach out to NGOs?

Both approaches are worth pursuing. On the one hand, academia can attract candidates by offering degree programs in interpretation and translation, including specialized courses in community interpreting, as well

as providing training opportunities for practicing interpreters through lifelong education. On the other hand, NGOs and state institutions can collaborate with academia to identify areas of need and develop training programs that meet their specific requirements (this is exactly what ÚTRL has been doing regularly since 2012). Additionally, academia can be proactive and communicate the importance of qualified community interpreters to NGOs and state institutions.

4. What is the most cost-, time-, and staff-efficient solution (if any)?

It is clear that there is no one-size-fits-all solution. Each situation and context will require a different approach, and the war has uncovered many new challenges in this regard. However, we have learned valuable lessons from this experience, and it seems feasible to work out a solution in the long term to secure a sufficient number of adequate community interpreters in everyday life and emergency situations.

5. Competition between professional interpreters and non-professional community interpreters:

Professional and non-professional interpreters play an essential role in community interpreting (see Antonini, Cirillo, Rossato, Torresi eds. 2017). However, it is important to ensure that professional interpreters are recognized for their training and expertise and are deployed accordingly, and that non-professional interpreters, as well as ad hoc interpreters, are used appropriately in situations where their skills and knowledge are sufficient.

6. Remuneration arrangements:

The hourly fee of a non-professional community interpreter or intercultural worker who cooperates with NGOs and state institutions is typically 4-5 times lower than the fee of a professional conference interpreter. This significant pay disparity highlights the issue of underpayment of community interpreters, which needs to be addressed to improve ethical and professional standards in the field, including potential burnout. However, it is a complex and contentious issue that requires in-depth analysis to arrive at an equitable and sustainable remuneration arrangement.

8. National Restoration Plan

In response to the war and the influx of Ukrainian refugees to the Czech Republic, the Institute of Translation Studies and the Department of East European Studies submitted a grant application for a project that aims to provide training for (community) interpreters in Ukrainian (Russian) and Czech, as well as conference interpreters in the language combination of

Ukrainian-Czech. In July 2022, the project was granted funding from the National Restoration Plan⁵ for the period of July 2022 to May 2024.

The first pilot course in conference interpreting took place in January 2023, and the first pilot course in community interpreting is planned for September 2023. The course is expected to be a 3-day training, covering 30 hours of practical training and 15 hours of self-study. The first part (5 teaching hours) will be common for all participants, i.e., in both Ukrainian and Russian – an introduction to community interpreting. The second part (25 teaching hours) will be divided into two groups: Ukrainian-Czech and Russian-Czech. The maximum number of participants for each language group has been set at 12. Each group will be led by two instructors so that both native languages are covered.

In addition to the training, a set of supplementary materials is being prepared. The set of materials covers around 40 thematic modules that will be discussed and interpreted. Each module includes a brief description of a role-play situation and a trilingual glossary for the specific topic. In June and July 2023, a sample scenario with different interpreting scenarios will be recorded and commented on in audio-visual format.

Furthermore, short presentations with audio commentary for the introductory theoretical part of the pilot course are being prepared, each lasting approximately 15-20 minutes. These materials will be used directly in the course and subsequently posted on a dedicated project website. Additionally, materials for self-study within the pilot course, such as recommended professional publications on community interpreting topics and links to suitable internet resources, are also being prepared.

The course is expected to be accredited by the Ministry of Education as part of lifelong education for a duration of 10 years. The plan is to make it available to the general public, with an anticipated start date in June 2024.

It is obvious that in the future, the need for interpreting between Ukrainian and Czech (and between Russian and Czech) will increase. Therefore, we trust that our newly designed and tested courses will be a solid foundation for the training of non-professional interpreters and further education of professional interpreters in Czech and Ukrainian/Russian.

9. Conclusion

This article presents a short overview of the history of community interpreting in the Czech Republic and highlights the contribution of the Institute of Translation Studies at Charles University in developing specialized training programs for community interpreters and intercultural workers. The institute's training programs cater to various groups, including students, NGOs, and the general public. The article also examines

⁵ NPO_UK_MSMT-16602/2022.

the institute's response to the sudden demand for interpreting services due to the influx of Ukrainian refugees and raises several contentious issues that need to be addressed. It is evident that community interpreting will continue to evolve and expand in the coming years, given the growing demand for these services amid the migration crisis.

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