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## An Analysis of Interpreter and Translator Training and Assessments Abroad

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*The issues considered in this article are related to assessment in translators and interpreters training. Traditional tests in translators and interpreters education are found to be indirect, incomplete, imprecise and subjective. The shift to constructivism in education introduced the idea of «assessment for learning». A descriptive analysis of the developments in the assessments used at the Graduate School of Translation and Interpretation of the Monterey Institute of International Studies, California, reveals a tendency towards a more learner-centered education environment. The Y-track curriculum model, well-balanced formative, summative and ipsative assessments at different study periods, examination procedures, and introduction of alternative forms of assessment are the evidence of an ongoing process. The inclusion of alternative forms of assessment (such as a portfolio) can add depth and range to assessment regimes and foster the learner's participation in the education process, ensuring the development of self-assessment skills that contribute towards a student's life-long learning.*

*Keywords: assessment, quality assurance, curriculum development, interpreter and translator training, alternative forms of assessment, testing, examinations, portfolio.*

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### Point

According to C. Wyatt-Smith and J. Cumming the introduction of a fundamentally new model of assessment is inevitable. «The traditional 'rites of passage' of school-leaving and university entrance examinations, degree finals and professional qualifications are likely to be gradually replaced by the ability to accumulate credit at different times and levels. Individuals will be able to study for credit in different settings such as school, college, university or work, at different times—pre-work, during work and post-work, during retirement and through different means such as e-tests and work-based

assessment as well as through more traditional performance assessments. The credits obtained will accumulate into a personal portfolio—a record of achievement that provides a unique and self-managed narrative on each individual's life-long learning» (Wyatt-Smith et al., 2009:ix).

The methods of translation and interpretation instruction, as a relatively young, independent academic discipline, have been actively developed in recent years (Alekseeva, 2003; Ieronova, 2006; Prozorova, 2006; Budarina, 2007; Anfimova, 2008; Ieronova, 2008; Khomutova, 2008). Although it has received growing attention as a research area, the quality

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assurance in interpreter and translator training is understudied in comparison to other branches of translation and interpretation research. One of the most understudied issues is the assessment of translation and interpretation training, despite the fact that the role and purpose of assessment and testing in the broader educational context is an area of increasing interest (Muratova, 2006). «Assessment plays a key role in the educational system» according to Martinez Melis and Hurtado Albir. Melis and Albir consider it is necessary to:

1. Research the current situation of assessment in translation teaching
2. Catalogue the existing bibliography
3. Develop a database of current assessment practices in curricula translator training centers (e.g. tests, assessment criteria, programs, etc.)
4. Carry out surveys amongst teachers and students in order to know their views on assessment (in J. Del Rio, 2005).

### **Example**

A valuable contribution to the field was made by D. Sawyer (2004), who investigated two fundamental aspects of interpreter education: curriculum and assessment in the Graduate School of Translation and Interpretation (GSTI) of the Monterey Institute of International Studies, California. Current trends show two broad research directions based on the purpose of assessment: «assessment of learning» (not contributing to the students' learning) and «assessment for learning» (having 'learning' as a goal). The latter came into use in the late 1980s and early 1990s and can be described as «the process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by learners and their teachers to identify where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go and how best to get there» (Gardner 2006, p. 3). This article presents a descriptive analysis of assessment practices in translators

and interpreters training, particularly with regard to the aspect of «assessment for learning». «Changes in the nature of work, globalization, the information revolution and the increasingly social nature of contemporary challenges also suggest different priorities for education systems. These will in turn require different priorities for assessment practices. By contrast with the pursuit of maximum accuracy in educational measurement, which largely defined the 20th-century approach to examinations, testing and assessment, the agenda for assessment in the 21st century shows signs of a growing preoccupation with 'fitness for purpose' and impact on learning». (Wyatt-Smith et al., 2009, vii).

The overarching purpose of professional training is «to produce interpreters who are able to work immediately and reliably on the market» (Sawyer, 2004, p. 56). Due to the lack of government control over higher education institutions in the USA, the educators apply the recognized standards of professional associations as the basis for their own standards of education and development. «Evaluation will remain a problematic issue for as long as internal criteria ('accomplishment of learning aims') fail to connect with diversified professional practice. In many countries professional certification is quite independent from educational degrees, a situation that might suggest the degrees are not trusted by employer groups» (Pym, 2009). This link between professional and educational spheres ensures a flexible approach to the development of the GSTI professional program, thus adequately reflecting the current situation on the market.

The curriculum documents of the GSTI consist of a school-wide promotional brochure and a website (<http://www.miis.edu/>). Much information about studying is left unspecified and there is no clear statement about the goals of the educational program in terms of observable performance in tasks, the breadth and depth

of subject matter knowledge or the nature of interpretation and translation as skills. The sequences of courses in specific degree paths is clearly described in the curriculum documents and in the map of the typical route that a Translation and Interpretation student might take at the Institute. However, there is no indication of workload in terms of credits, hours, or required commitment. For example, The Master of Arts in Translation and Interpretation (MATI) degree is described at the site as a dual specialization in both translation and interpretation, including a summary of the advantages of studying complementary skill such as these and a statement on the popularity of the degree.

The curriculum documents do not meet the transparency criterion – «requirements to an information system, such as reflecting priorities, accessibility and effectiveness, and correlation between aims and major directions» (Vcherashnij, 2009) – for all stakeholders.

The complete picture emerges only after meticulous examination of the individual course descriptions. This is clearly not ideal, as it could hinder the learner's participation in the interactive process of the development of professional competencies. «Essential features of social constructivist educational experiences will include authentic practice in actual professional activities, a collaborative learning environment including not only interaction among students but also the extensive involvement of the students in every aspect of the teaching/learning process, including syllabus and curriculum design, task selection, subtask identification and assessment of their own performance and learning, as well as program effectiveness» (Kiraly, 2000). This shift in the traditional focus of authority, responsibility and control away from the teacher towards the learner causes a new type of student – perhaps more motivated, more responsible for decisions, and therefore

ultimately more responsible for the quality of their progress.

The consequences of such a lack of information are found in the analysis of assessment data. Research on student perceptions of the Qualifying Exams (which students must pass at the end of the first year to enter the GSTI's second-year curriculum) indicated three main factors contributing to student anxiety: uncertainties about grading criteria; a lack of stress management skills; uneasiness about testing conditions (Sawyer, 2004, p. 177). The jury survey also showed evident fluctuation in professional judgment throughout assessment. There was a lack of conformity with regard to jury conduct, the administration of exam procedures and the presence of external examiners. Criteria for assessment and scoring were also not highly explicit or highly consistent among jury members or language programs, thus undermining their validity and reliability (Sawyer, 2004, pp. 184-189). Though the summative assessment procedures were analyzed in a definite educational context, its conceptual insight is obvious. The public access to details of curriculum and assessment is necessary as a prerequisite for the level of educational quality provided the institution.

The course of study is subject to modifications that meet the learner's individual needs. Firstly, this is achieved by Y- track curriculum model. Most professional knowledge is taught and applied in the second year courses, while first year courses are universal – irrespective of the chosen degree. This provides the students with the opportunity to reconsider their chosen career, and also to develop necessary skills and professional qualities. The GSTI offers three degrees in the applied language arts, all of which last two years: a Master of Arts in Translation and Interpretation (MATI); a Master of Arts in Translation (MAT); a Master of Arts in Conference Interpretation (MACI). In the first

semester, professional knowledge is handled exclusively in language-specific courses. An introduction to the theory of translation is given in lectures in the second semester. Therefore, the amount of time spent on written as opposed to oral translation skills during the first year of study is roughly equivalent. In addition, a seven weeks elective is offered across the all of the language courses during the first semester of study. This elective includes memory and active listening exercises in addition to a general introduction to note-taking skill. At the end of the first year, students are required to take Qualifying Examinations in their language combination and disciplines in order to prove their readiness to move onto the second year of study in their selected degree track.

Analysis of examination results shows that MACI students do not always perform better in the GSTI interpretation exams than students who study both translation and interpretation. This can be explained by two reasons. Firstly, the MATI provides job skills that are highly marketable in the language industry and some students may select this degree track even though they show great promise for conference interpretation. Secondly, the simultaneous development of translation and interpretation skills reciprocally enhances the development professional competencies, proven by the final assessment outcomes.

There are also two more ways to modify the curriculum according to students needs. Advanced-entry students must meet all general admission requirements, pass the Qualifying Examinations in their degree, and hold a degree from a recognized school of translation and interpretation or provide evidence of significant professional experience (in which case students generally study for one year). Some students may also extend their program over a three-year period by spending a year abroad after completion of their second semester.

The role of assessment types and purposes at different stages of the GSTI curriculum makes the relationship between curriculum, assessment, and learning outcomes explicit. According to the purpose of assessment, three areas are distinguished:

1. Formative assessment aims at giving feedback on the teaching/learning process and takes place during the course of teaching.

2. Summative assessment provides qualitative information on students' achievements and instruction effectiveness.

3. Ipsative assessment is an ongoing reflection upon the learning process of the students, including the evaluation of current performance against previous performance, as well as against the performance of others. Ideally, ipsative assessment should continue throughout the professional career of the student. A determining factor in the training context is the degree to which ipsative assessment is purposefully integrated into the curriculum, thus allowing the student to fully benefit from self-assessment opportunities to enhance his/her learning. (Sawyer, 2004, p. 107).

The examinations and other forms of assessment (the terms 'assessment' and 'test'/'testing' are used interchangeably by D. Sawyer) are closely related to curriculum objectives. Student performance must be assessed appropriately, meaningfully and usefully at all stages of the curriculum. In most programs (apart from ongoing formative testing in individual courses) three areas of testing are apparent: (1) entry-level aptitude or, more appropriately, diagnostic testing for selection purposes; (2) intermediate, formative testing for entry into or confirmation of the selected degree track; (3) final, summative testing for the purpose of degree or certificate conferral (Sawyer, 2004, p. 109).

Entry-level assessment in the GSTI falls into two categories: off-campus testing, often in

the form of a written translation, essay or précis-writing task as part of an application package completed at home by the candidate; and on-campus testing, a form of in situ testing through a series of oral interviews and written translation tasks. The early diagnostic test during the first (and sometimes second) semester of study consists of written and oral portions, which include essay-writing, translation, and précis writing exercises as well as pronunciation, extemporaneous speech, abstract thinking, and self-assessment tasks.

Intermediate testing has the purpose of assessing whether the candidate has the potential to continue and successfully complete the degree program. It is in this regard that intermediate testing is both formative and summative – formative in that feedback is given on a student's work, thus guiding decision-making for continuation in the degree program, and summative in that learners demonstrate baseline competence on specific occasions.

Final assessment is aimed at determining whether the candidate is ready to enter the profession. Summative assessment at the end of a course or program provides essential information on the effectiveness of the instruction. «When the majority of the students do poorly on an assessment, it may be the fault of the students but the difficulty is more likely to be found in the instruction. The teacher may be striving for learning outcomes that are unattainable by the students, may be using inappropriate materials, or may be using ineffective methods for bringing about the desired changes» (Gronlund, 1998, p. 11).

The final testing as a high-stake exam is of crucial importance for the graduates' life careers, as well as the reputation of the educational institution. Highly reliable and valid exam procedures and unambiguous assessment and scoring criteria should be a matter of great concern for the educators.

Traditional testing in translators and interpreters education cannot be considered an objective endeavor, considering that they have the following negative aspects (Bachman, 1990):

1. Tests are indirect as they measure the test taker's performance on a particular occasion rather than his underlying competence.

2. Tests are incomplete. The choice of topic and terminology is limited in scope, as the test can constitute only one sample and «the performance we observe and measure . . . is a sample of an individual's total performance.» (Bachman, 1990, p. 33).

3. Ratings are imprecise. «In measuring language abilities, where we are not dealing with direct physical comparison, the units of measurement scales must be defined, and precision, or reliability, becomes, in part, a function of how we define these units» (Bachman, 1990, p. 35).

4. Tests are subjective. Developers make subjective decisions when designing tests and selecting materials; test takers make subjective judgments in taking tests, and scorers make subjective decisions in scoring them (Bachman, 1990, p. 37).

5. Tests are relative. There are «'norms' of performance» for example a «kind of language use» defined by variety, dialect, and register, as well as a «standard for score interpretation . . . in terms of levels of language abilities» (Bachman, 1990, pp. 38-40). It remains a matter of discussion, however, whether norms in interpreter testing have been precisely defined.

The Professional Examinations in the GSTI are a series of comprehensive, summative assessment instruments administered after the fourth semester of study. There are two exam sessions per year: May and August. Students must pass all sections of the Professional Exams (example, Table 1) to be eligible for graduation (Sawyer, 2004, p. 159). As can be seen from the

Table 1. GSTI’s Professional Examinations for MATI

Translation		Consecutive interpretation		Simultaneous interpretation
<b>B into A</b> 2 exams, one general and one technical text; each 600 words in two hours (600 words in three hours for oriental languages)	<b>A into B</b> 2 exams, one general and one technical text; each 500 words in two hours (500 words in three hours for oriental languages)	<b>B into A</b> 1 general and 1 technical speech, 5 minutes each	<b>A into B</b> 1 general and 1 technical speech, 5 minutes each	<b>B into A</b> 1 general speech without and 1 technical speech with text, 10 minutes each

table the examination process is labor, time and effort-consuming for the students as well as the juries (one party should produce and another assess 14 texts).

Juries consist of a minimum of three instructors in the relevant language combination, as well as external jury members. The examinations are scored on a pass-fail basis using an ordinal scale with four levels:

90–100 **high pass** (Should be awarded only occasionally to exceptionally qualified candidates),

75–89 **pass** (Should be considered the norm for passing candidates),

70–74 **borderline fail** (Should be awarded to candidates who stand a good chance of passing a retake in August),

0–70 **fail** (The student should be urged either to take an additional year to work on language deficiencies or to consider another career).

The scale can be found in the Faculty Handbook and Guidelines for Exam Jurors. The passing grade (75) represents comparatively high requirements.

Having done an objective and thorough analysis of existing GSTI assessment procedures, D. Sawyer concluded that they were unsuccessful and unreliable, suggesting nine steps for improving their examination procedures:

1. Conduct a ‘needs’ analysis by relating examinations to curriculum objectives

and other forms of assessment, e.g., entry-level, intermediate, and final testing, as well as summative, formative, and ipsative assessment.

2. Document exam procedures currently in place, including a description of the testing procedures, the collection and filing of all test materials, (i.e. examination texts – videotapes of source speeches and student performances, recordings of jury deliberations etc.), and the resulting scores.

3 Review test methods (e.g. the aspects of environment, test rubric, input, and response) specific to interpretation and the needs of the training program. Write test specifications.

4. Develop a representative pool of exam texts from real-world sources for faculty and student reference and conduct an analysis of text features grounded in linguistics. This process should result in descriptions of prototypical exam texts that are empirically validated.

5. Collect representative performances for faculty and student reference, as well as rater training, e.g., videotapes of exam sessions and documentation of the corresponding assessment.

6. Define constructs for assessment according to domain, criteria, and standards, as well as level of expertise.

7. Define assessment criteria for each of these constructs. Criteria should be elaborated in terms of observable performance and include a clear

description of the performance characteristics on each level of assessment (score).

8. Train raters (jury members) in exam design, jury procedures, and the systematic application of assessment criteria.

9. Explore alternative methods of assessment, e.g., portfolio, and benefits of their use in the program of instruction. (Sawyer, 2004, p. 128).

The inclusion of alternative forms of assessment can add depth and range to systems of assessment, as well as fostering the active learner's participation in the education process. An alternative assessment «is any method that differs from conventional paper-and-pencil tests, most particularly objective tests», which includes «authentic assessment, performance-based assessment, portfolios, exhibitions, demonstrations, journals, and other forms of assessment that required the active construction of meaning rather than the passive regurgitation of isolated facts» (McMillan, 1997, p. 199). According to McMillan's definition, traditional testing in translation and interpretation can be considered an alternative assessment form (though not a perfect one), as a translation or interpretation student's main activity is to construct new meanings. Another form – the 20,000 word translation thesis required of MATI students until 1996 – seems to overcome some of the limitations of traditional testing (group translations, requiring project management skills and including terminological and editing coordination, are also possible, although this requirement was dropped due to course overload). This form of assessment shows considerable advantages compared to traditional testing, as a result of its learner-oriented nature: the text was of the student's choice (though of course subject to approval by the thesis adviser) as was the time, place and intensity of the translation work. Moreover, the student was provided with an opportunity to demonstrate

a broad set of professional skills. Teamwork is an essential aspect of both translating and interpreting (interpersonal, intercultural, and networking skills are an integral part of a translator or interpreter's training) and this form of assessment allowed the student to more easily demonstrate competence in such an area.

One more example of an alternative form is a model that represents an integration of academic study and project work connected with the translation and interpretation of real-life orders (Mikhailova, 2009). Developed by The Faculty of Translators and Interpreters of the International Higher School of Practical Psychology in Latvia it was incorporated into the curriculum. The results of the long-term studies have demonstrated the necessity of such real-life integration in the instruction both in class and in students' independent work (Lebedeva, 2008), providing the development of «respective skills, i.e. languages and cultures knowledge, text analysis, use of various tools, and active translation skills, which also include working in teams, working at big projects, keeping to certain deadlines» (Ch. Nord, 2009).

The portfolio idea has a long history and is developed now through the sphere of translation and interpretation training. D. Sawyer shows how portfolio assessment can complement the traditional one-chance interpreter testing. The collection and organization of a student's work is a similar process to that of gathering 'evidence' on performance quality. Students play an active role in the process of selecting their work, therefore aiding self-reflection and analysis. Such a system gathers a much greater range and depth of sample performances and also facilitates both process and product-oriented assessment, thus combining all three forms of testing – ipsative, formative and summative. «A translation portfolio may be defined as a

systematic collection of students' translations or reports of tasks to represent a variety of students' achievements in the translation course over a specified period of time. It may include the students' actual products, a statement of why each translation is included and the criteria used in evaluating them. It is not a random, but systematic, collection of students' products in that the student's products are related to major instructional goals.» (Li, 2006).

According to D. Sawyer, the integration of alternative forms of assessment into the curriculum requires the substantial revision of existing courses, as well as several years for their implementation and a reduction in the number of examinations. Without such a reduction, it is highly unlikely that such labor and time-intensive forms of assessment can be successfully implemented, as in general higher education faculties already work at peak capacity. Nevertheless, F. Federici suggests a combination of assessments, supported by a bespoke form of formative feedback as a time-effective solution for tutors. «The feedback sheet familiarizes students with assessment criteria and professional practice, thus fulfilling the expectations for an alignment of teaching and learning outcomes in a professional perspective...» (Federici, 2007). R. S. Glukhikh and O. G. Smolyaninova (2009) developed an electronic portfolio method that «is motivated to

personal achievements presentation, collecting different artifacts in electronic form, which could be catalogued and sorted for analysis» and suggest three ways of portfolio assessment: by quantitative measure, by qualitative measure, by expert opinion (Glukhikh et al., 2009).

### Resume

Using a portfolio will ensure a practice of self-reflection and self-assessment among students, eventually contributing to the life-long development of the student's skills. Freihoff advocates an approach to instruction in which students learn to analyze their own performance and compare their individual progress to the specific goals of the program. He regards self-diagnosis and self-correction in a foreign language as particularly important, as students rarely have constant access to instructors and native speakers and must therefore learn to judge the quality of their performance independently (Freihoff, 1993, p. 210). The need for improvement in the assessment of interpreter and translator programs emerges from the existing and future challenges that currently face the Russian education system. It is therefore only by observing, analyzing and learning from the experience of well-established programs around the world that the development of a successful national quality assurance system in such a sphere can be nurtured and achieved.

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## **Из зарубежного опыта оценивания уровня подготовки переводчиков**

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*Статья посвящена подготовке переводчиков и месту системы оценивания в программах обучения переводчиков. Конструктивизм – популярная за рубежом философия в образовании – привнес новый взгляд на оценивание как инструмент повышения качества процесса обучения. На примере учебного плана и процедур оценивания, разработанных в Школе устного и письменного перевода (г. Монтерей, Калифорния), раскрывается потенциал альтернативных форм оценивания для формирования компетенций лингвиста-переводчика.*

*Ключевые слова: оценивание, оценка качества, программа обучения, подготовка переводчиков, альтернативные формы оценивания, тестирование, экзамен, портфолио.*

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