Positive experiences about interpreting in the community

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Project Details

This project sought to collect positive experiences from interpreters working in the community setting, including good working relationships with service providers, strategies used to maintain accuracy and impartiality and to abide by the code of ethics in difficult situations. The aim of the study was to balance the current debate which concentrates on the negative aspects of interpreting, and to provide positive, concrete advice to interpreting students and practising interpreters. Anonymous online surveys were conducted of practising interpreters, with the majority of the 94 respondents indicating that they find their work enjoyable, rewarding, and significant. For the most part, they feel that they are treated well and perceived as professionals by the service providers and the non English speakers, are comfortable with their role as prescribed by the code of ethics and despite the generally low remuneration and less than adequate working conditions, are happy to work as community interpreters.

"Working as a community interpreter is for me extremely rewarding. I absolutely love it. Our role is so diverse and so important. I really believe that I make a difference in my every day work environment. It gives me a strong sense of pride". (Respondent 69)

Participants

The interpreters who answered the questionnaire were mixed in terms of language combination (25 different languages) and years of experience (from less than 5 to more than 20 years experience), so we can say that neither of these factors contributes to having positive experiences. What was significant, however, was that almost all of them (95.7%) had NAATI accreditation and well over half (64.1%) were graduates of formal interpreting courses, hence the four main languages were representative of the languages offered at TAFE and university courses (Arabic, Auslan, Chinese and Spanish). We can therefore speculate that being formally trained and accredited may correlate with having positive experiences.

The graduates of formal courses were asked to rate the usefulness of their education. The results showed that a significant majority (83%) found their training to be either essential (55.9%) or very useful (27.1%), with only 15.3% rating it as moderately useful and one person alone as not at all useful. It can be safely concluded that this sample clearly demonstrated the usefulness of formal training for effective practice as a community interpreter. When asked to elaborate on why they found their training useful, their answers fell into the following categories in order of importance: essential for obtaining the necessary interpreting skills, the necessary theoretical grounding to make informed decisions, to gain professional status, to learn about the ethics of the profession, to gain confidence as a professional, to be better equipped to interpret accurately, to have the adequate preparation to be up to the job at hand, to gain the trust of those for whom they interpret and to learn the required terminology. Although the most common answers related to the acquiring of the necessary interpreting skills and the theoretical underpinning of their work, issues of professional status, professional confidence and credibility were also very important considerations of trained interpreters. Being formally trained gave them not only the skills and knowledge necessary to perform their work, but
also the confidence and credibility of a professional. This may be an important contributing factor leading to positive experiences.

**Interpreters’ perceptions of their role and the code of ethics**

Contrary to the results of research studies conducted in other parts of the world which seem to indicate that community interpreters do not like the role of accurate and impartial interpreters but prefer the role of advocate for the minority language speaker, this group of interpreters were overwhelmingly in favour of the prescribed role. 97.7% said that their role was to interpret accurately and impartially, and most (86.2%) reported using the direct approach of interpreting which was described as “interpreting every turn in the first and second persons, allowing the main participants to communicate directly with each other”; only 1 untrained respondent reported using the mediated approach (interpreting in the second and third persons, summarising what each speaker says and relaying only what you think is relevant) and 12.6% stated using a combination of both (5 being trained and 11 untrained). This shows a clear link between training and the approach adopted. Interestingly, only 6.9% reported that the service providers rarely use the direct approach, with the rest (93.1%) stating that they either use it often (58.6%) or most of the time (34.5%). This may indicate that the choice of approach by the service provider may be determined by the approach adopted by the interpreter.

With regards to the code of ethics, almost all (96.7%) stated that it was useful to them. 80.9% stated that they resorted to the code of ethics to help them solve ethical dilemmas, and only 4.4% stated that ethical dilemmas forced them to breach the Code often or very often. When asked to describe the usefulness of the code of ethics, over half of them said they were useful as general guidelines. Other interesting responses included: that the code helps them to perform a professional job, it sets boundaries, it gives them credibility and it acts as a safety net. Anecdotal evidence has suggested that the code of ethics sets unrealistic expectations of interpreters who are constantly faced with ethical dilemmas that force them to breach the prescriptions found in the code. This group of interpreters contradicted that perception strongly. They expressed the view that they didn’t need to breach the code of ethics when pressured to do so by the other participants. Instead, they had the confidence to refuse unethical requests by explaining that it contravened their code of ethics, thus educating the other participants about their professional role. This in turn gave them credibility as professionals. The quote below provides an example of how interpreters use the code of ethics to explain their obligations to their clients without offending them.

> “The Code of Ethics is not only a guide to an interpreter, but also a good excuse for interpreters to refuse clients’ gifts or other demands that could lead to an unprofessional conduct of an interpreter. In that situation, I always tell my clients that I am bound by the code of ethics and doing what the client demanded me to do will get me into trouble. I live on this job and I must follow the code of ethics to keep my job. All clients agree and happily leave without further trouble”. (Respondent #13)

**Professional regard shown by service providers**

The majority of these interpreters (81.6%), who were mostly formally trained and NAATI accredited, reported being treated as professionals by other professionals, especially those working in the legal and welfare areas. They thought that their qualifications had a lot to do with this perception. This is an encouraging result. Much has been done in the past 30 years to educate service providers, especially legal professionals, about the work of interpreters. These results seem to indicate that those efforts have not been in vain. Similarly, a high 69.3% thought that the non-English speaker also perceived them as professionals, and 78.4% agreed that if they acted as professionals, they were more likely to be treated as such by those for whom they interpreted.

**Reasons for working in the community setting**

The majority of responses reflected that interpreters genuinely enjoy doing the work that they do, finding it rewarding, interesting, challenging and stimulating. A number of them stated that they feel they are making a real contribution to society by making a difference in facilitating communication. The following quote provides an example of the kind of satisfaction these interpreters report to experience during the course of their work:

> “...”
“It gives me GREAT SATISFACTION after each assignment when I see the relief on the NESB’s faces and I get many appreciative comments from service providers expressing how easy I made their job and how good I was. Interpreting to me is more than a job from which I earn money. It is a passion for me to help people to understand exactly what is being said to them and to make them understood. I have been there myself when I could not express myself in English and I know the exact frustration and anxiety I felt and these NESB feel now”. (Respondent 88)

**Descriptions of positive experiences**

Some expressed that all their assignments constituted good experiences or that there were too many to recount. Others highlighted their best experiences, which can be summarised into the following categories: when they feel appreciated, when they feel they are part of team with the service provider, when they feel they have made others happy and when they feel the communication flowed smoothly because they did a good job. It can be speculated that these positive experiences are made possible by these interpreters’ high level of competence and professionalism.

**Interpreter strategies to overcome difficulties**

The results showed that these interpreters were confident and secure enough to be able to admit when they had difficulties and interrupt to ask for clarification, repetition or to correct a mistake. Such an attitude demonstrates a high degree of professionalism.

**Practical implications of the study**

This survey presents encouraging results about the work of Australian interpreters in the community setting. It shows that well qualified interpreters are comfortable with their role, have the confidence to live up to their ethical obligations and therefore command respect from those for whom they interpret. This combination therefore, leads to high job satisfaction. The results also show that there have been improvements in the way service providers work with interpreters and in their perceptions of them.

**Publication of results**

A version of this report was published in InTouch, the members’ newsletter of the Australasian Institute of Interpreters and Translators (AUSIT), in 2010.

Further reading on the same project will also be found in Hale, S. (forthcoming). The positive side of community interpreting. An Australian case study, *Interpreting*