

STUDENTS' AWARENESS OF ETHICAL ISSUES IN PUBLIC SERVICE INTERPRETING DOMAIN: EMPIRICAL STUDY

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Abstract

The article analyses the relevance of interpreter's professional ethics competence in public service interpreting domain from students' perspective. Modern world sets numerous challenges to professional training of public service interpreters competent to work in socially significant contexts such as healthcare, legal-administrative and educational. The mentioned settings are becoming increasingly diverse both in terms of languages spoken and culture. In these conditions public service interpreters are often called on to act not only as interpreters, but also as lingua cultural mediators bridging linguistic and cultural gaps between service users and service providers. The cross-cultural context of communication is characterized by high potential for ethical issues and dilemmas arising in the course of public service interpreter's professional activity. However ethical aspect of interpreter's professional practice tends to be undervalued and often is not included into the curriculum. The article **aims** to investigate the degree of awareness regarding ethical issues of students who are doing master's program on public service interpreting. To achieve the aim a number of **tasks** have to be fulfilled:

- To study the relevant research literature;
- To explore the social context of public service interpreter's professional activity;
- To conduct a practical experiment with the view of assessing the degree of students' awareness regarding ethical aspects of interpreter's work.

The research **methodology** rests on quantitative method and includes method of survey and statistical analysis. The research **findings** revealed that students generally become aware of ethical issues mostly through hands-on experience and have very little prior theoretical training on the subject. On the basis of the experiment the author formulates recommendations on enhancing ethical competence of public service interpreters-to-be.

Keywords: professional ethics, public service interpreting, lingua cultural mediation, limited language proficiency.

1. INTRODUCTION

Modern world is characterized by fast social changes that are taking place on global scale affecting almost all spheres of social life. Among such changes increased mobility of population, whether it is forced or economic migration, plays significant role in reshaping linguistic and cultural profile of economically developed countries and regions. The above circumstance sets new challenges to professional training of public service interpreters as this kind of interpreting occurs in socially meaningful contexts and by virtue of its nature is very responsive to social changes.

In the context of public service interpreting, which basic aim is facilitating the communication between service users (who are commonly vulnerable groups of population with very limited official language

proficiency such as refugees, migrants, migrant workers etc.) and service providers (health care and administrative institutions and services, police stations) professional ethics component acquires even more significance as it occurs in institutional setting with its agency - specific norms, rules and values. In comparison to other types of interpreting public service interpreter has to work in the contexts that are potentially characterized by power misbalance: representatives of social institution vested with some authority on the one hand, and service users on the other; performing hi/her professional duties public service interpreter is to take care to remain within the professional role without trespassing the professional roles of other professionals involved in the communication; public service interpreter not only acts as a conveyer of messages from source language to the target language, but also routinely acts lingua cultural mediator bridging possible cultural gaps between communicants thus enhancing the effectiveness of communication.

The above mentioned factors suggest that the context in which public service interpreting occurs has high potential for ethical issues to arise, however this subject is often overlooked in the curriculum of interpreters' training programs both on bachelor and master degree levels, or given insufficient attention. The article aims at investigating the degree of students' awareness regarding ethical issues as well as assessing the degree of importance which students who are doing the master program course on public service interpreting attach to studying interpreters' professional ethics as subject.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Professional ethics has long been regarded as a vital competence of an interpreter in general and of a public service interpreter in particular. Though there are a lot of researches devoted to general issues of interpreter's professional ethics, studies that would focus on specificity of public service interpreting from ethical perspectives are not so numerous. Interpreters' and translators' professional associations across the world have adopted various codes of ethics for interpreters practicing in various domains, but most commonly they contain general provisions formulated within the basic principles or cannons such as accuracy, confidentiality, impartiality, maintaining role boundaries, competence, professional development.

Scholars investigate the issues of interpreters' professional ethics from various perspectives. S. Kalina undertakes a comprehensive research into ethical challenges that interpreters working in various domain may confront with. The scholar comes to a logical conclusion that though general rules enshrined in the majority of codes of ethics retain their relevance in the field, nevertheless they should be applied differently, depending on the setting in which the interpreting event occurs (Kalina, 2015). Researchers also point out that various settings require different interpreting norms as well as ethical principles (Gentile 2012). Thus regarding specifically public service interpreting researchers highlight the vitality of interpreter's ability to make consistent ethical decisions between maintaining neutrality and open advocacy (Prunč, 2012). There is an opinion among scholars that the ethical principles proclaimed by codes of ethics may not be so important for public service interpreting domain as interpreter's personal responsibility for effectiveness of communication. Codes of ethics treated and directly applied as a rigid set rules to be followed will be inadequate to address a whole range of real situations that practitioners may face (Dean & Pollard, 2011). U. Ozolins believes that each type of interpreting has its own ethics in broad sense closely related to interpreter's role. The scholar also argues that ethical responsibility rests not only with interpreter, but also with representatives of social institutions involved in the communication (Ozolins, 2014).

Thus we have briefly considered the major research trends related to professional ethics within public service interpreting domain to gain minimum sufficient theoretical background for the experiment.

3. EXPERIMENT

To assess the degree of students' awareness regarding interpreters' professional ethics the author conducted an experiment that involved second year students of "Interpreting and Translation for Public Services and Institutions" Master degree program at RUDN University. The total number of participants was 45. The students who took part in the experiment were doing their internship in Moscow health care centers and immigration offices. The experiment involved students who graduated in 2017 and 2018.

3.1 Methodology

The author developed a questionnaire that was offered to the students twice: before the internship and three weeks after the internship. We determined the three -week period as this time is enough for students to review their first real hands-on experience in interpreting, but at the same time this period is not too long to forget possible difficulties and frustrating moments.

The survey contained the following questions:

1. Are you interested in learning interpreter's professional ethics?
2. Have you ever studied interpreter's professional ethics?
3. Have you encountered with ethical issues in the course of your practical experience?
4. Do you believe that knowledge of professional ethics is a necessary competence for public service interpreter?

Students were expected to give yes/no answers, but they were encouraged to feel free to provide any comments. Both groups of respondents (students who graduated in 2017 and 2018) were offered the same questionnaire.

3.2. Results and Discussion

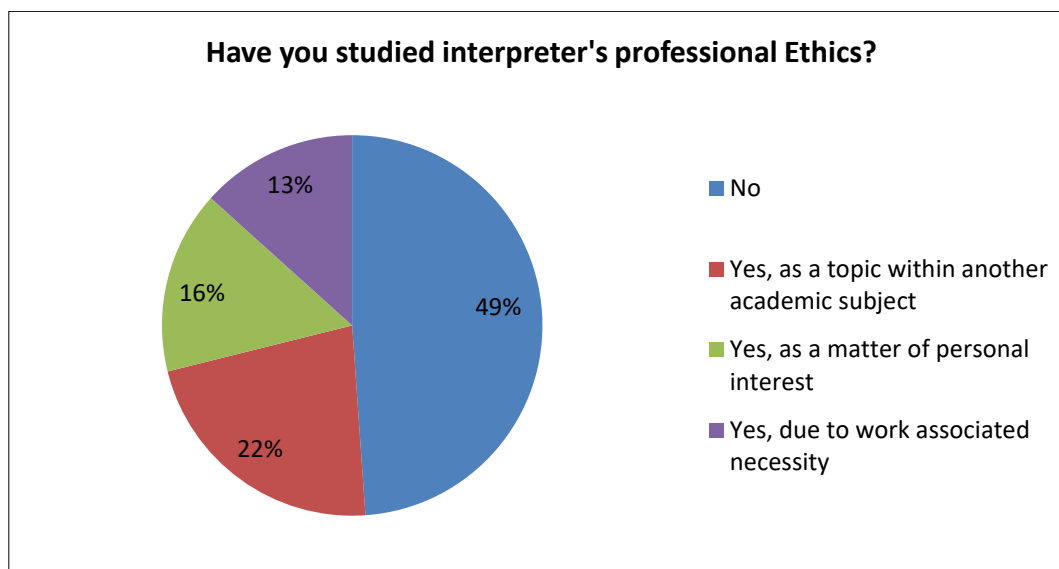
At the first stage of the experiment (before the practical internship) the following results were obtained

Table 1. First Stage Data

Questionnaire Item	positive responses	negative responses
1. Are you interested in learning interpreter's professional ethics?	17	28
2. Have you ever studied interpreter's professional ethics?	23	22
3. Have you encountered with ethical issues in the course of your practical experience?	10	35
4. Do you believe that knowledge of professional ethics is a necessary competence for public service interpreter?	15	30

In spite of author's expectations regarding the first question surprising 38% of respondents indicated that they were interested in learning about interpreter's professional ethics. The results obtained for the second question were even more surprising they are presented below in the diagram made on the basis of statistically processed answers and students' comments.

Fig.1 Survey results for question #2



As can be seen in the diagram little less than half of the students who were doing their pre-thesis internship have never learned interpreter's professional ethics in the course of their study. It was indicated in the comments provided by the respondents that they saw no point in theoretical training on this subject as it would create additional academic workload and would be of little use for them in practice. However heartening 51% of respondents have studied professional ethics in this or that way. Comments provided by respondents indicate that interpreter's professional ethics is normally dealt with as a topic within the

framework of other subjects such as Translation Studies for example in bachelor degree course and students are normally expected to learn it as part of their independent studies. It is interesting to note that 16% of students involved in the experiment were motivated enough to learn about interpreter's professional ethics by themselves. As their comments suggest, students' interest in learning ethics sparked mainly from their expectations regarding the social setting of public service interpreting. Another reason that prompted students to learn about ethics themselves was their practical experience as some students while doing their master degree program combined it with part-time work as interpreters. Comments suggest that though their practical experience have been limited so far, nevertheless they have come across with some ethical issues that caused them frustration and feeling of not being competent enough.

Table 2 Second stage data

Questionnaire Item	positive responses	negative responses
Are you interested in learning interpreter's professional ethics?	30	15
Have you encountered with ethical issues in the course of your practical experience?	27	18
Do you believe that knowledge of professional ethics is a necessary competence for public service interpreter?	33	12

Table 2 shows the results obtained in the cause of the second stage of the experiment. As is clearly can be seen figures have changed sufficiently. Answering the first questions almost 67% of respondents indicated that they were interested in learning more about interpreters' professional ethics having had a practical experience of interpreting in healthcare centers and immigration offices students. Both medical and administrative settings proved to have high potential for conflicts related to ethical issues. Internship supervisors identified numerous instances when students obviously trespassed the limits of their professional role. Most common mistakes made by the students in this regard can be grouped in to three categories:

- 1) Instead of facilitating the communication between service users and service providers through eliminating language barriers students behaved as full participants of the communication trying to express their own opinion on the situation;
- 2) Since the communication within the public service interpreting domain in general and in healthcare setting in particular may be emotionally charged and stressful, the interpreter has to be stress resilient and is required to remain neutral at all times. People with limited official language proficiency often tend to appeal to the interpreter for help as he/she is the only person who shares their native language. Inexperienced interpreters may find themselves drawn into friendly relations with their clients. In the course of the internship there were cases when students championed for their clients' rights going into open conflict with medical professionals or immigration office employees.
- 3) The majority of students perceived representatives of the institutions as their immediate superiors. There were instances when students ran little errands for medical professionals and immigration office employees disregarding the fact that it was not consistent with their professional role.

Almost 60% of the respondents encountered with various interpreter's ethics related issues in the course of their internship. Comments provided by students indicate that they were often at a loss how to react in certain situations and would prefer to have a clear guidance. Students' comments also revealed that the major difficulty was to maintain the neutral role of another professional involved in the doctor-patient or immigration officer-applicant communication.

The majority of students answering the third question acknowledged that better understanding of interpreter's professional ethics would make them feel more competent and professional in public service interpreting domain as it would enable them to find more effective ways of facilitating communication between service users and service providers in both institutional and cross-cultural contexts. Respondents explicitly indicated in their comments the necessity of studying ethics before going into real practice.

4. CONCLUSION

The undertaken experiment revealed that the majority of students become aware of interpreter's ethics significance for successful and competent professional performance only through hand-on experience, be it

part-time job or internship within the framework of the educational program. Generally students have very little theoretical training on interpreter's ethics prior to having any practical experience; ethical issues from professional perspective are normally discussed as a separate topic within the framework of other professionally-oriented subjects with no emphasis on its significance as an important professional competence of an interpreter. However, the experiment also revealed that students of Master level programs on public service interpreting tend to develop an independent interest in this subject as they anticipate possible difficulties of working in cross-cultural environment. On the basis of the above we find it possible to formulate the following recommendations:

- To include interpreter's professional ethics as a separate subject into the curricular of Master level educational programs on interpreting;
- Since institutional context in which public service interpreting takes place tends to affect the communication itself as well as the communicants to a greater extent than it happens with other types of interpreting, it seems fruitful to develop a specific course on public service interpreter's ethics that would cover issues of interpreter's professional role depending on the setting: healthcare, administrative, legal.

The findings of the conducted research may be of practical value in developing specific courses on interpreter's ethics as they highlight certain problem areas with which student may encounter in practice, as well as give some insight into students' attitude to the raised issues.

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