Making ‘Real Interpreters’: European Standards for Sign Language Interpreter Education

On December 10, 2013, the world mourned the death of one of its most influential leaders, Nelson Mandela. On this same day, the sign language interpreter working this internationally viewed memorial service made the world hyper aware of a globally relevant problem: the marginalization of the deaf community by substandard interpreting provision. Thamsanga Jantjie, the interpreter working solo for several hours at that day’s event, will forever be known as the ‘fake interpreter.’

Just one week later, with this debacle still fresh in the public consciousness, representatives from the European Forum of Sign Language Interpreters (efsl) presented to the European Commission the results of a two-year international collaboration: Learning Outcomes and Assessment Guidelines for graduates of sign language interpreting training programs. Its aim was to help ensure that sign language interpreters educated in EU countries graduate from interpreting programs at minimum levels of competency to practice. While South Africa’s ‘fake interpreter’ showed the world the importance of such standards, one might wonder how efsl decided on the specific competencies that a qualified interpreter should have.

Starting the Process
Efsli began the process in 2011 by sending surveys to more than fifty sign language interpreter training programs throughout Europe. A draft of the publication that would eventually become “Learning Outcomes for Graduates of a Three Year Sign Language Interpreting Training Programme” was written based on information gleaned from these surveys. Three working seminars, workshops, and a collaborative online platform followed, all leading to revisions and improvements. Eventually, the document was handed to the efsl Committee of Experts in July 2013 for final enhancements (efsl, 2013).

Determining the Framework
Professor Lorraine Leeson is the Chair of the Committee of Experts. She is an Irish Sign Language/English interpreter and the Director of the Centre for Deaf Studies at Trinity College Dublin. In a recent interview, she offered some interesting insight into the development of efsl’s Learning Outcomes. First, it is interesting to realise that the Learning Outcomes were aimed at graduates of a three year interpreting training program because three years is the standard length of time for an undergraduate degree as stipulated in the Bologna Process, which aimed to develop standards of higher education throughout Europe. While it is voluntary and some countries have opted to configure their higher educational processes differently, the standards have become prevalent across Europe over the past decade.

Professor Leeson shared that Trinity College has a designated department to ensure that course outcomes align with the Bologna Process. When developing efsl’s Learning Outcomes, she says that this oversight was wonderful, this department did make additional suggestions, validated the appropriateness of the outcomes listed, and affirmed that efsl’s Learning Outcomes aligned with European standards.

The Learning Outcomes were mapped according to another internationally recognised and utilised framework, the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR) which describes competencies that one would have if one was a beginner, intermediate, or advanced user of a language. Though initially developed for spoken languages, CEFR is not language or modality specific, so it can be applied to any language, including signed languages. CEFR is linked to milestones of linguistic development and can be used for various teaching, learning, and assessment purposes and was therefore deemed the most appropriate foundation on which to base many of the required competencies.

Challenges
When developing the Learning Outcomes, one challenge was in determining what was reasonable to expect of an individual graduating from a three year interpreter training program. Some competencies suggested via the initial survey were skills
more descriptive of an interpreter with over a decade of experience. Professor Leeson emphasised that Learning Outcomes are generally describing threshold competencies that must be met in order to pass a course, and that a great deal of effort was made to map the Learning Outcomes in accordance to what was reasonable and appropriate to expect of a person finishing a three year program.

Another interesting insight is that the original efsli aim seemed to be focused on creating a standard curriculum, but many of those in higher education felt that this was not a desirable goal because it could potentially quash innovation. With this in mind, the Learning Outcomes seemed a more sensible approach, as the descriptors could then inform a curricula--and curricular review.

**Using the Documents**

Professor Leeson explained that the Learning Outcomes are only a starting point to show that efsli is committed to quality and are meant to be reviewed in 5-10 years. They are the collaboratively agreed absolute minimum requirements for practice, and were meant to be used a reference document. Professor Leeson shared that in Ireland they have been proposing changes to the structures of their degree programs, and it has been helpful to know that if the program is changed in certain ways it is still meeting the minimum threshold requirements endorsed by efsli.

Ireland is not the only country who has used the efsli documents when making changes to an interpreting program. In fact, efsli’s Learning Outcomes influenced Finland as well. Outi Mäkelä is a senior lecturer at Humak University and was one of the Finnish representatives involved in the efsli Learning Outcomes working seminars. She also co-chaired a working seminar forum. In a recent interview, she explained that Humak was updating its curriculum at the same time that the efsli Learning Outcomes were developed. New approaches and ideas were thus revealed and incorporated into the new Humak curriculum. A focus on threshold level competencies and clear, skill-based aims all factored into the new curriculum, along with a complete revamp of Interpreting Studies. Interpreting Studies now covers history and theory of interpreting, an internship, and the most common professional settings for sign language interpreters--health care, education, employment, institutional, and social and private life settings.

Efsli’s Learning Outcomes will, hopefully, resonate across sign language interpreter training programmes throughout Europe and foster the making of many ‘real interpreters’ for years to come.

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