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# Collaborative Approach to Designing Training Modules for Future Public Service Interpreters in Slovakia

*Enfoque colaborativo en el diseño de módulos de  
formación para futuros intérpretes de los servicios  
públicos en Eslovaquia*

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**ABSTRACT:** Since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, the number of foreigners in Slovakia has doubled. This increase has been accompanied by extremely intensified need for public service interpreters and language mediation in general. As Slovakia had long been a country with one of the lowest numbers of foreigners in Europe and at the same time there is no study programme in the country focusing on public service interpreting (PSI) or dialogue interpreting, an immediate and comprehensive response to the situation was required. Drawing on the perspective of (i) the (ad hoc) interpreters, (ii) the institutions and organisations providing migration and integration services in Slovakia, and (iii) academic institutions in the country the paper aims to present the methodological concept and the development of educational and training modules for future interpreters, the inclusion of which in the curriculum represents a significant step towards improving the training of public service interpreters in Slovakia.

**KEYWORDS:** interpreter training; ad hoc interpreters; student interpreters; cooperation.

**RESUMEN:** Desde el comienzo de la guerra en Ucrania, el número de extranjeros en Eslovaquia se ha duplicado. Este incremento ha generado una demanda significativamente mayor de intérpretes en el ámbito de los servicios públicos y de la mediación lingüística en términos generales. Dado que Eslovaquia ha sido históricamente

uno de los países europeos con menor presencia de extranjeros y carece de programas de estudios especializados en interpretación de servicio público (ISP) o interpretación dialógica, se requiere una respuesta integral y urgente ante este escenario. En este artículo se tiene como objetivo exponer el concepto metodológico y el desarrollo de módulos educativos y formativos para futuros intérpretes en Eslovaquia. Partiendo de la perspectiva de (i) los intérpretes *ad hoc*, (ii) las instituciones y organizaciones que ofrecen servicios de migración e integración en el país, y (iii) las instituciones académicas locales, esta investigación tiene como objetivo presentar el concepto metodológico y el desarrollo de módulos educativos y de formación para futuros intérpretes. La inclusión de estos módulos en el plan de estudios se considera un avance significativo para mejorar la formación de los intérpretes de servicios públicos en Eslovaquia.

PALABRAS CLAVE: formación de intérpretes; intérpretes *ad hoc*; estudiantes de interpretación; cooperación.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Slovakia is a small country, which in the past was not a traditional destination for migrants and people tended to emigrate from the country rather than to immigrate to it. However, since the start of the war, the number of foreigners living in Slovakia has more than doubled. According to data for 2023, the largest group living in the country were citizens of Ukraine (176 522)<sup>1</sup>. Migrants from Ukraine are a specific group with 83 % of them being children and women (including the older persons), with the vast majority of them (about 114 000) having a tolerated stay in the country thanks to the temporary shelter status (Slovak Ministry of Interior 2023).

Temporary shelter ensures migrants in the EU, for example, the right to access work and employment services, the national social protection network, private accommodation outside humanitarian or asylum centres, health care, education, social benefits for families with children or disadvantaged persons, and other public services (UNHCR 2023a). International, national and local organizations, voluntary associations, municipalities, civil society associations and NGOs assisting migrants, charities and the private sector play an active role in ensuring access to public services in Slovakia (UNHCR 2023a).

Surveys on migrants' access to public services in Slovakia (UNHCR 2023b) show that 87 % of people have at least one urgent need. The most common needs are for accommodation (45 %), health care (29 %), material assistance (25 %), employment (24 %), food (16 %) and education (12 %). 81 % of people have at least one information need. The most common information needs include information about financial support (35 %), health care (33 %), accommodation (24 %) and employment opportunities (21 %). In relation to social protection, 74 % of persons or members of their household have applied for social benefits provided by the government. However, 10 % of persons or members of their household have encountered problems in accessing social benefits, which mainly include language barriers (49 %) and long waiting times (21 %). Regarding childcare (IOM 2023), 42 % of parents report that they do not have access to childcare

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<sup>1</sup>Further groups are citizens of Serbia (19 045), Vietnam (9 082), Russia (8 434) and Georgia (5 217) (Slovak Ministry of Interior 2023).

for children who have not reached the age of compulsory school attendance. In relation to health care needs, 53 % of persons report living in a household with persons with specific needs, which mainly include chronic diseases and serious health conditions (87 %), visual (70 %) and hearing impairments (19 %). The most common barriers to migrants' access to health care in Slovakia include long waiting times (58 %), fees (50 %), general inaccessibility (22 %), language barriers (21 %) and discrimination (17 %).

## 2. AD HOC (STUDENT) PUBLIC SERVICE INTERPRETERS IN SLOVAKIA

The services of professional interpreters with appropriate training are essential in ensuring migrants' access to public services and information and in overcoming barriers. However, in Slovakia there is no systematic offer of public service interpreter education, university study programmes do not specialise in dialogue or community interpreting (for more on interpreter education in Slovakia, see Hodáková and Zsarnóczyiová 2024).

Research in this area also confirms that interpreting in migrants' communication with organisations and public institutions is mostly provided by voluntary ad hoc interpreters who do not have the necessary training, preparation and often not even sufficient linguistic competence (Hodáková and Ukušová 2023). According to recent research, student volunteers are also currently frequently used for interpreting services. Yakunkina (2024) in her thesis conducted a survey among students of Slovak universities (N=51) and found that 56,9 % of them had active repeated experience with interpreting, 55,2 % had more than 5 interpreting assignments and 44,8 % had interpreted 2 to 5 times. These were mostly students coming from Ukraine (58,6 %), Slovakia (27,6 %) and Russia (10,3%), who are mainly studying foreign languages (27,6 %) translation and interpreting (24,1 %) or technical study programmes (20,7 %). The most frequent spheres in which students provided interpreting services were at school or university (39,3 %), at the foreign police department (19,6 %), at the doctor's office (14,3 %), at the employment office (10,7 %) or directly at the border crossing (5,4 %). Regarding students' motivation, 41,4 % indicated that they volunteered themselves, 37,9 % indicated that they were contacted by a migrant aid organisation, and 17,2 % of students were approached by a family member. Students reported stress (41,4 %), lack of terminological knowledge (34,5 %), and overall poor language skills (20,7 %) as the most common problems in interpreting.

Although ad-hoc interpreters (especially students) without relevant education and training are often used for public service interpreting in Slovakia, research confirms that the institutions and humanitarian organisations that cooperate with them consider professional interpreters with adequate training to be the most effective form of communication. Machine translation (smartphone translation apps) was considered the second most effective form by organisations, followed by ad-hoc interpreters, but these latter two forms are much more accessible compared to professional interpreters (Chlebušová 2023; Chlebušová in Hodáková 2024).

### 3. DESIGN, IMPLEMENTATION AND EVALUATION OF COURSES FOR PUBLIC SERVICE INTERPRETERS IN SLOVAKIA

From the above-described characteristics of the current demand and supply of interpreting and the needs and barriers in the field of migrants' access to services and information in Slovakia, it is evident that it is necessary to respond adequately also in the field of education and training of future interpreters. In the following section we present specific selected activities that are being implemented within the national project entitled PSI collaborative training in Slovakia: design, implementation and evaluation of courses for public service interpreters (2022 – 2024) funded by the Slovak grant agency KEPA.

The project focuses on the training of public service interpreters in Slovakia on the basis of close cooperation between the university department, the European Expert group WG PSIT & LLD (EMT) and partners from practice. In a collaborative way, based on the mapping of real current needs and demands, specific communication situations, topics, types of discourses and languages, the partners are collecting texts, audio recordings and activities aimed at practical training of interpreting skills. All the collected and developed learning materials are being used in pilot courses for students interested in acquiring competence in public service interpreting

The project design (Hodáková 2024) is based on the assumption that by training interpreters in PSI grounded in a rigorous mapping of the needs of the participants and the cooperation of the training institution with practitioners, it will be possible to:

- a. contribute to more effective communication between foreigners and public institutions;
- b. improve integration processes in society;
- c. raise society-wide awareness of the importance of competent interlingual and intercultural transfer;
- d. to increase the credit of the profession of (public service) interpreter in Slovakia.

The main objectives of the project are:

- a. mapping the current need and requirements in the field of PSI in Slovakia;
- b. mapping the methodological concepts of PSI education in European countries, where PSI training and its practical application represent examples of good practice;
- c. creation of a methodological concept for a theoretical and practical course on PSI in Slovakia;
- d. creation of publications, teaching materials and exercise books on PSI;
- e. implementation of a pilot course on PSI in cooperation with a civil association active in the field of integration services in Slovakia;
- f. evaluation of the quality and effectiveness of the pilot course on PSI.

The main outcomes of the project are:

- a. resource repository targeted at public service translation and interpreting in healthcare, social services and community work;
- b. series of workshops for students with community interpreters, humanitarian and social workers;
- c. multilingual educational videos and interactive materials for students;
- d. educational modules on ethics in public service interpreting, healthcare interpreting and interpreting in social services;
- e. training and methodological seminars for interpreting teachers.

All outputs of the project are the result of a collaborative approach based on the cooperation of the university department providing training for future translators and interpreters (Department of Translation Studies at the Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra), a European expert group focused on the issues of public service translation and interpreting and partners from practice (civil associations assisting migrants, community centres using ad hoc interpreters, individual interpreters and public service workers). On the basis of this cooperation, we have been able to identify the specificities of public service interpreting in Slovakia, with a particular focus on health care, social services and community work (cf. Hodáková and Zsarnóczaiová 2024), and to develop educational materials and training modules focusing on these specificities. The project has developed modules and materials addressing more general aspects such as ethical principles and basic rules in the work of public service interpreters, which are independent of language combination, as well as specific aspects in individual spheres of interpreting, such as health care and social services tied to specific working languages.

The modules and materials are or will be available on the website [www.vzdelavanietlmocnikov.sk](http://www.vzdelavanietlmocnikov.sk). It is a platform that has been created for the needs of the KEGA project and its objectives are:

- a. enhancing opportunities for education and training in interpreting at universities and in practice;
- b. increasing cooperation between universities and practice;
- c. raising awareness of the importance of language and cultural mediation, migration issues and inclusive societies.

Pilot testing of selected materials was carried out at both national and international level. After the testing has been completed and methodological seminars for teachers have been organised, the modules will be included in the curriculum for the training of future interpreters at the Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra. The continuity of the project results will be ensured by the fact that the materials are applicable in further courses, which can be modified according to the specific working languages, or the training course can become an integral part of the university education of students of philological disciplines focused on the preparation of translators and interpreters in the form of a series of elective courses. In the following section a general educational theoretical and practical module on the key concepts and ethical principles of public service interpreting, which was developed within the project specifically for the Slovak context, will be presented in more detail.

### 3.1. *Key Concepts and Ethical Principles in Interpreting (Not Only) in the Public Service in Slovakia*

One of the aspects that ad hoc interpreters most often mentioned as problematic in our research (Hodáková and Ukušová 2023) is the ambiguous role definition of the interpreter, misunderstandings due to inadequate expectations of the communicants from the interpreter, unawareness of the interpreter's competences, rights and duties. With the exception of court (sworn) interpreters, there is no systematic training or certification of interpreters in the public service in Slovakia, nor are there professional associations in the country that would formulate fundamental principles in this profession.

In setting up the pilot course, it was therefore necessary to create a module/publication that would summarise the basic principles and generally accepted rules applied also to the Slovak context. One of the outputs of the project was an educational module on Ethics in Public Service Interpreting and a publication entitled *Key Concepts and Ethical Principles in Interpreting (not only) in the Public Service*<sup>2</sup> (Hodáková 2024).

The publication is designed as a training manual and presents an introductory general module that is independent of the specific interpreting setting, topic or language and presents the key aspects and ethical principles in the work of public service interpreters. The book is primarily intended for the needs of university education, i.e. it can be used in the training of future interpreters as a supplement to «traditional» conference interpreting training, or in other philological degree programmes offering education in languages of migrant communities in Slovakia. However, it can also be used in other, non-university types of training of interpreters and interpreters in the public service.

Working with the module through the publication helps to acquire knowledge, train skills and shape attitudes in the field of communication with foreigners and public service interpreting in two coherent blocks:

- a. from the perspective of (public) institutions and
- b. from the perspective of interpreters.

The first session, entitled *What institutions need to know*, focuses on specific aspects of communication with foreigners from the perspective of public institutions. The documents in this section often focus on the principles of communicating with clients in situations of language barriers in general, i.e. not necessarily using interpreting or translation, but many aspects are also relevant to the perspective of interpreters and thus useful in the sensitisation of students and subsequent training.

The second section, *What interpreters need to know*, represents their perspective and offers available documents on the issue of codes of ethics and basic principles for the

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<sup>2</sup> The publication is in Slovak under the title *Základné zásady a etické princípy v tlmočení (nielen) vo verejnej službe* available at <https://www.vzdelavaniemocnikov.sk/vzdel%C3%A1vacie-materialy>. Accessed July 9, 2024.

work of interpreters (in the public service) in different countries and at different stages of elaboration. Recommended activities and exercises are also included in this section.

Although the publication focuses primarily on the training of future public service interpreters, we also suggest activities that involve translation or other forms of work with written text, as translation and interpreting are often combined in practice and in education. Since key competences important for any professional practice are developed by combining knowledge, skills and attitudes, the publication uses a combination of theoretical and practical activities and exercises to expand knowledge, shape attitudes and develop the skills of future public service interpreters.

The exercise book is independent of the working languages, but we assume knowledge of Slovak (or Czech) and English at the level of written text comprehension. The workbook is written in Slovak, the available texts used are in Slovak, Czech and English. The order of the individual modules as well as the order of the individual activities can be freely changed according to individual preferences. The module is interactive and in addition to the basic text contains links to other documents, videos, preparation materials, explanations and notes.

The module was developed in collaboration with practitioners (interpreters, community and social workers, health professionals with experience in working with foreigners, managers of migrant support organisations). The collaborative approach was also applied in the subsequent pilot testing of the module's activities, which we describe in the following section.

### 3.2. *Pilot Testing*

One of the main objectives of the national KEGA project mentioned is evaluation of the quality and effectiveness of the pilot course on PSI. In order to test and evaluate the effectiveness of the project outputs, we have established international cooperation between the Department of Translation Studies at Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra (Slovakia), the Centre for Translation Studies of the University of Vienna (Austria) and the Department of German Studies of the University of Ostrava (Czech Republic). The result of this initiative is an international project entitled Competence - Resilience - Efficiency. Together on the way to a complex profile in the training of future community interpreters funded by Aktion Austria - Slovakia<sup>3</sup> and Aktion Austria - Czech Republic (2023 – 2024).

Although these three countries of the project are geographically very close to each other, the situation with regard to the practice and training of public service translation and interpreting is very different (Hodáková and Kuklová 2024). Within the international project, the following specific content in particular was implemented:

- a. survey of the current status in the field of public service interpreting in the respective countries of the project - needs, stakeholders, profile of

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<sup>3</sup> Project lead: University of Vienna, Austria; national coordinator: Soňa Hodáková.

- interpreters, communication situations and strategies, topics and possible applications;
- b. expansion of specialised knowledge (legal foundations of migration, theoretical foundations in the humanitarian context, ethical aspects of community interpreting, terminology, phases of interpreting work, etc.);
  - c. development of students' skills and competences (workshops and modules on public service interpreting in different settings, lectures and practical training on resilience, coping and mental health in crisis interpreting);
  - d. evaluation of the effectiveness of the training (complex evaluation of effectiveness and feedback on the learning and training process using real-life scenarios and simulations as well as authentic interactions);
  - e. international awareness campaign among students on the topics of migration, interaction, inclusion and cultural sensitivity.

The project used a variety of methods:

- a. interactive and cooperative methods (discussions, practical exercises, simulations) were primarily used to train practical skills in specific roles, promote social interaction and encourage group dynamics; effective cooperation within the group was essential for the successful completion of the overall assignment;
- b. peer feedback;
- c. the supporting programme included online and onsite presentations and discussions by the project partners on the current situation in Austria, Slovakia and the Czech Republic.

Within the framework of the above-mentioned content, using various methods, a pilot testing of the materials developed in the KEGA project was carried out in international cooperation, and after its successful implementation, the materials and publications can be used in the training of future public service translators and interpreters in Slovakia, in methodological seminars for interpreting teachers, workshops and training for ad hoc interpreters in practice, etc.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The paper presented a particular form of national and international collaboration between academic institutions and practitioners in the development of materials for the training of future public service translators and interpreters in Slovakia. The collaboration was carried out in different phases of the project activities, from mapping the situation, needs and barriers in practice, through joint development of materials, their pilot testing to their implementation in university training as well as in non-university preparation of interpreters. We believe that a collaborative approach is essential to achieve a quality output that takes into account the demands of practice and combines them with the potential of academic institutions.



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