

Implementation of Language Proficiency Assessments for the Training of Community Interpreters

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Abstract

Kyoto University of Foreign Studies is planning to conduct language proficiency measurement tests (aptitude tests) in the fields of medical and infectious diseases, school and education, administration (disaster), and administration (tax) to have students certified according to the ISO 13611:2024 Interpreting – Requirements and guidelines for community interpreters.

The main objectives of this initiative are:

1. To identify the language proficiency requirements for community interpreters in the education, medical, administrative, legal, and tourism sectors. By developing multilingual language proficiency test questions in cooperation with domain experts, the aim is to reflect the comprehensiveness of the assessment and the language requirements for practical community interpreting.
2. Conduct aptitude tests based on the student's primary language and analyze the results. Based on the analysis, educational programs should be considered to improve students' language proficiency.

We aim to help students acquire practical community interpreting knowledge and skills through these efforts. Additionally, the content of the aptitude test has been revised in line with the university's educational curriculum. It consists of two sections assessing vocabulary comprehension, listening comprehension, and vocabulary operation skills. This comprehensive approach ensures that students' language skills are thoroughly evaluated. This comprehensive language proficiency assessment differs from traditional language examinations in that it measures students' overall language proficiency in practical community interpreting situations. In this way, it aims to “visualise” the language proficiency of the examinees.

Keywords: Community Interpreting Program, Aptitude Test, ISO13611:2024

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Introduction

In today's globalized world, community interpreters play an increasingly vital role in bridging language barriers across diverse settings, including healthcare, legal environments, and community services (Hale, 2007). The growing demand for qualified interpreters who possess both language proficiency and cultural competence has led to the development of structured initiatives for training certified community interpreters. At Kyoto University of Foreign Studies, a comprehensive program has been established to address these needs through standardized assessments and training programs (Sato, 2023).

1. Development of the Community Interpreter Training Program

The Community Interpreter Training Program at Kyoto University of Foreign Studies was initiated in April 2024, responding to the growing need for qualified interpreters in Japan's increasingly multicultural society. The program aligns with the university's founding principle of "PAX MUNDI PER LINGUAS" (World Peace through Languages) and aims to develop interpreters who can contribute effectively to multicultural communication while meeting the requirements of ISO 13611:2024 certification.

The program is designed to enhance both language proficiency and communication skills essential for multicultural society. Pöchhacker (2004, pp. 162-163) emphasizes that community interpreters serve as cultural mediators, a role that requires more than just linguistic competence. This understanding forms the foundation of the program's comprehensive approach to interpreter training.

2. Program Structure and Implementation

The Community Interpreter Training Program consists of several key components designed to ensure comprehensive training and assessment. The program requires students to complete two specialized courses totaling four credits: "Special Topics in Community Interpreting I" and "Special Topics in Community Interpreting II." These courses are available to third-year students and above, with different proficiency level requirements for various language combinations.

The curriculum incorporates both theoretical foundations and practical skills development. According to Takeda and Yamada (2017, pp. 2-3), maintaining a balance between theory and practice is crucial in interpreter education. The program addresses this through a combination of classroom instruction and practical experience, with students required to complete at least 30 hours of interpreting practice.

2.1 Curriculum Design

The program's curriculum encompasses various essential elements of community interpreting. Core components include basic interpreting theory, ethical guidelines, and specialized terminology in fields such as healthcare, legal services, and education. Students also learn practical skills such as note-taking techniques, memory enhancement exercises, and summary interpretation methods.

The curriculum particularly emphasizes cultural mediation skills, which Hale (2007, pp. 25-26) identifies as crucial for community interpreters who work across multiple domains.

This includes training in cross-cultural communication, understanding of institutional systems, and management of cultural differences in various professional contexts.

2.2 Language Proficiency Requirements

Students seeking ISO 13611:2024 certification must demonstrate language proficiency at CEFR B2 level or higher in their target language combination. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) B2 level indicates an "independent user" who can understand complex texts and interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 24).

2.3 Practical Experience Component

The program's 30-hour practical experience requirement allows students to develop real-world skills through various activities, including:

- Supervised interpreting practice sessions at the university
- Volunteer interpreting at local international events
- Internships with partner organizations
- Community service interpreting

Rudvin and Tomassini (2008, pp. 245-246) emphasize that practical experience is essential for connecting theoretical knowledge with real-world application. The program's practical component provides students with opportunities to face authentic interpreting challenges while receiving professional guidance.

3. Assessment Methods and Implementation

3.1 Aptitude Test Design

The aptitude test, developed in collaboration with Osaka University, is a comprehensive 90-minute assessment that evaluates multiple competencies. According to Angelelli (2009, pp. 13-15), interpreter assessment should encompass not only language skills but also intercultural communication competence and ethical judgment capability.

The test evaluates:

- Language proficiency in reading, listening, writing, and speaking
- Interpreting skills through consecutive interpretation exercises
- Cultural knowledge and awareness
- Professional ethics understanding
- Memory and note-taking abilities

3.2 Test Implementation and Analysis

Between July 2018 and September 2024, the aptitude test was administered to 856 participants across multiple language pairs, including English-Japanese (786 participants), Russian-Japanese (8 participants), Chinese-Japanese (47 participants), Portuguese-Japanese (12 participants), and Vietnamese-Japanese (3 participants). Starting from 2024, the test is administered biannually using dual-monitor computer laboratories.

Interesting patterns emerged from the test results analysis. Some students without study abroad experience demonstrated CEFR C1 level proficiency, while others with high scores on traditional language tests showed lower performance on the aptitude test. This aligns with Hayashida's (2020, p. 493) observation that community interpreting requires a complex set of skills beyond mere language proficiency.

3.3 Unique Features of the Assessment

A distinctive aspect of the aptitude test is its evaluation of implicit speech interpretation in both directions. This addresses what Pöschhacker (2004, pp. 113-115) identifies as the need to assess not just linguistic equivalence but also the understanding of speaker intention and context.

4. External Partnerships and Support Systems

The program has established significant partnerships to enhance its effectiveness and credibility. A notable collaboration was formed with the Kyoto City International Foundation in April 2023, marking an important step toward establishing the program's credibility as an ISO 13611:2024 certification body. This partnership exemplifies what Ozolins (2010, pp. 19-20) describes as essential institutional support for developing professional community interpreting services.

4.1 Partnership Benefits

The collaboration with the Kyoto City International Foundation provides multiple advantages. The partnership facilitates practical training opportunities through foundation-sponsored events and consultation services. Professional staff members from the foundation contribute to the program through guest lectures and specialized training sessions. The foundation also provides support for the ISO certification process and potential employment opportunities for program graduates.

4.2 Inter-university Collaboration

An agreement with Osaka Tourism University allows students who wish to obtain ISO 13611:2024 certification before March 2028 to process their certification through their institution. This arrangement demonstrates the type of institutional cooperation that Sato, Komori, and Hayashida (2022, pp. 43-50) identify as crucial for improving the quality of community interpreter education.

5. Challenges and Future Directions

5.1 Technological Integration

The rapid advancement of technology presents both challenges and opportunities for community interpreter training. As Cronin (2013, pp. 132-134) predicted, technological progress has significantly transformed the role of interpreters. The program must continuously adapt to incorporate new technologies, including AI-assisted interpretation tools and remote interpreting platforms.

5.2 Quality Assurance in Practical Training

Ensuring the quality of the required 30 hours of practical experience remains a significant challenge. Angelelli (2004, pp. 77-79) emphasizes the complexity of interpreter roles in medical settings, highlighting the need for quality practical training across various domains. The program continues to develop mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating practical experience quality.

5.3 Multilingual Expansion

The program faces increasing demand to expand its language offerings beyond the current combinations. Mizuno and Naito (2015, pp. 28-29) note the growing importance of multilingual community interpreting in Japan. Meeting this demand requires securing qualified instructors and developing appropriate materials for additional language pairs.

5.4 Remote Education Development

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the need for remote education capabilities. As Matsushita (2020) observes, the interpreting industry increasingly requires skills in remote interpreting and online tool utilization. The program is developing specialized content for remote interpreting education and online training methodologies.

5.5 Post-certification Support

The program recognizes the need for continuous professional development after certification. Napier (2011, pp. 59-61) emphasizes the importance of ongoing reflection and improvement in interpreting practice. The program is developing support systems for graduates, including regular skill enhancement opportunities and professional networking events.

Conclusion

The Community Interpreter Training Program at Kyoto University of Foreign Studies represents a significant advancement in interpreter education within Japanese higher education institutions. Through its comprehensive curriculum, rigorous assessment methods, and alignment with international standards, the program provides a model for developing professional community interpreters equipped to serve in an increasingly multicultural society.

The program's emphasis on both theoretical knowledge and practical experience, combined with its innovative assessment methods, addresses what Pöchhacker (2011, pp. 22-24) identifies as the need for mixed-method approaches in interpreter training and evaluation. The implementation of the aptitude test, which evaluates both linguistic and cultural competencies, provides valuable insights into the complex nature of community interpreter qualifications.

Looking forward, the program faces various challenges, including technological adaptation, quality assurance, and expanding language coverage. However, these challenges also present opportunities for innovation and improvement in community interpreter education. The program's continued development and adaptation to emerging needs will contribute

significantly to the field of community interpreting and support Japan's evolution toward a more inclusive, multicultural society.

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