

The Pathway to Professionalism: A Descriptive Study of Becoming a Professional Interpreter in the United Kingdom

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الطريق إلى الاحتراف: دراسة وصفية حول كيفية أن تصبح مترجماً محترفاً في المملكة المتحدة

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Abstract:

This descriptive study outlines the pathway towards becoming a professional interpreter in the United Kingdom. Moving beyond the misconception that bilingualism is a sufficient qualification, this paper delineates the essential requirements of the profession. The requisite competencies, formal qualifications, specialised pathways, professional accreditation, and continuous professional development. The paper describes the interpreting market in the UK, highlighting the critical distinction between public service and conference interpreting, and the role of professional bodies like NRPSI, CIOL, and ITI. The study concludes that professionalisation in the UK is a multi-faceted process demanding linguistic excellence, rigorous training, specialised knowledge, and a steadfast commitment to ethical practice, all of which are necessary to meet the demands of a sophisticated and regulated interpreting market.

Keywords: United Kingdom; Professionalisation; NRPSI; Public Service Interpreting; Conference Interpreting; Qualifications.

الملخص :

تُقدم هذه الدراسة الوصفية مسار الاحتراف في الترجمة الفورية في المملكة المتحدة. ويعيّنَ عن الاعتقاد الخاطئ بأنّ إتقان لغتين يُعدّ مؤهلاً كافياً لتكون مترجماً محترفاً، تُحدّد هذه الورقة المتطلبات الأساسية لهذه المهنة، بما في ذلك الكفاءات الازمة، والمؤهلات المطلوبة، والمسارات التخصصية والتطوير المهني. كما تُسلّط الورقة الضوء على سوق الترجمة الفورية في المملكة المتحدة، مُبرزةً الفرق بين الترجمة الفورية القطاع العام والترجمة الفورية للمؤتمرات، واهمية الهيئات المهنية مثل الرابطة الوطنية للترجمة الفورية في القطاع العام (NRPSI)، ومعهد المترجمين الدوليين (CIOL)، ومعهد المترجمين الفوريين (ITI). وتخلص الدراسة إلى أن احتراف الترجمة الفورية في المملكة المتحدة عملية متعددة الجوانب تتطلب إتقانًا لغويًا متميّزاً، وتدريبًا دقيقًا، ومعرفة متخصصة، والتزاماً راسخاً بأخلاقيات المهنة، وكلها ضرورية لتنمية متطلبات سوق الترجمة الفورية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: المملكة المتحدة؛ احتراف الترجمة الفورية؛ الرابطة الوطنية للترجمة الفورية في القطاع العام (NRPSI)؛ الترجمة الفورية للقطاع العام؛ الترجمة الفورية للمؤتمرات؛ المؤهلات.

Introduction

This paper will discuss the process required to become a professional interpreter in the United Kingdom. To obtain data, the researcher relied on two main sources: firstly, the available literature about becoming a professional interpreter, and secondly, the researcher's experience as a professional interpreter in the UK for 8 years (2017-2025).

Becoming a professional interpreter in the UK requires several qualities and qualifications. Firstly, an interpreter needs to have decent education related to the subject for instance bachelor's degree in English/ Translation, and preferably any postgraduate degree for example Master's degree, and this is relatively limited to the UK, an increasing number of translation and interpreting agencies and governmental organisations prefer and sometimes demand that an interpreter must hold a DPSI degree, (Diploma in Public Service Interpreter).

This paper will describe the process of becoming a professional interpreter. It was found that interpreters with recognised qualifications such as bachelor's degree in English/ Translation have better opportunities to achieve success, but more importantly, interpreters are very likely to secure long-term job and better wages if they invest in one year of study and obtain a DPSI degree.

Discussion

The United Kingdom's position as a global centre for law, finance, and diplomacy has created a complex and demanding market for interpreting services. The role of the interpreter has evolved from that of an ad hoc linguistic helper to a highly skilled professional bound by a set of codes of conduct and ethics. This paper provides a comprehensive descriptive analysis of the pathway to becoming a professional interpreter in the UK. It posits that success in this field is contingent upon a structured journey involving formal education, specialised training, professional accreditation, and a commitment to lifelong learning. Securing a job as an interpreter in the UK requires a combination of language fluency, relevant qualifications, and practical experience. In addition, an interpreter can increase their chances of success in their career if he/she achieves a DPSI degree which is highly regarded in public services in the UK. Furthermore, a DPSI holder is often paid a higher rate due to the nature of assignments assigned to them. DPSI holder will generally work with the police contexts and Tribunal and Sheriff Courts, this is discussed further next.

The Diploma in Public Service Interpreting (DPSI)

The Diploma in Public Service Interpreting (DPSI) is a professional qualification designed for those who wish to work as interpreters in public service settings such as healthcare, legal, and local government contexts. The course has three pathways, Health, Law and Local Government.

The increasing linguistic diversity of nations like the United Kingdom has necessitated the development of robust frameworks for communication in public services. In this context, the Diploma in Public Service Interpreting (DPSI), established and awarded by the Chartered Institute of Linguists (CIOL), has emerged as a pivotal qualification. This paper provides a critical analysis of the DPSI, examining its role in professionalising the field of public service interpreting (PSI). It explores the structure, core competencies, and ethical underpinnings of the diploma, positioning it as a response to the historical reliance on informal, ad-hoc interpreting. DPSI is viewed by many scholars and experts as the benchmark for professional competence for ensuring equity, accuracy and professionalism in high-stakes public service settings, from legal and healthcare to local government. Interpreters are required to meet linguistic and intercultural demands, therefore DPSI rigorous assessment of consecutive and dialogue interpreting is seen as crucial element for the complex communicative performance needed in the field of interpreting (Wadensjö, 2014). It goes beyond simple translation to evaluate the management of interaction, a skill perceived critical for accuracy and fairness. Another distinction for the DPSI is the emphasis on professional/code of ethics. The explicit evaluation and continuous development of ethical knowledge is deemed as a key factor in protecting everyone's dignity and equity. Corsellis (2008) argues that a professional code of conduct is the "bedrock of professional practice" and the DPSI's requirement to adhere to this code reflects principles of impartiality, confidentiality, and role boundaries that are paramount for trust in extremely confidential interactions like legal and healthcare settings. Scholars and experts described DPSI as a specialist domain of knowledge. The pathway structure or components (Law, Health, Local Government) is designed to expand knowledge of the chosen component and promotes that effective interpreting requires more than language. Hale (2007, p. 198) strongly asserts that "interpreters need to be familiar with the specialized terminology and the procedures of the particular institution in which they work" The DPSI is structured to provide and test this very knowledge, ensuring interpreters understand the context of a police interview within police settings or a doctor's consultation governed by the GMC's duties (General Medical Council).

The Structure and Philosophy of the DPSI

The DPSI is a level 6 qualification on the UK's Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF), equivalent to a bachelor's degree with honours. The structure of this course is specifically designed to meet the current requirements of public service interpreting market.

Pathways and Specialisation

A main advantage of the DPSI is its pathway structure, which enables candidates to select their preferred speciality.

The main pathways are:

- 1- DPSI Law, which involves the study of the justice system (courts, police, immigration).
- 2- DPSI Health, which mainly concerns the study of medical and healthcare settings.
- 3- DPSI Local Government which involves the study of housing, social services, and education.

The variety of specialisations indicates that candidates are given a chance to focus mainly on a particular pathway. This is especially true that each pathway has a unique lexicon, procedural norms, and ethical pressures. For example, an interpreter in a police station must understand the Police and Criminal Evidence (PACE) Act 1984, while a healthcare interpreter must be familiar with medical terminology and the principles of patient confidentiality (NHS Code of Practice on Confidentiality), see table (1) below.

The Cost and Accessibility and Barrier

Undertaking the DPSI course is a costly process, as it involves course fees, examination fees, and self-funded preparation time let alone the difficulties encountered by full-time workers to allocate time to attend the course physically or online. This can be a significant barrier to entry for many both working and non-working individuals, potentially limiting the diversity of the interpreter workforce and increasing shortages in many languages. From the researcher's personal contacts with a DPSI course provider in Glasgow, UK (Global Languages Limited) as well as another personal contact with a DPSI expert and tutor, the cost of the diploma can be between £600 to £900 which is equivalent to \$750-\$1000.

Assessment Methodology

To meet the requirements of DPSI, a candidate needs to undertake formal and comprehensive assessment, testing both theoretical knowledge and practical skill through a series of units as described below.

- a) Interpreting: candidates are required to carry out simultaneous and consecutive interpreting exercises based on real-life scenarios, for instance, a doctor-patient consultation, or a police interview depending on their chosen pathway.
- b) Sight translation: this test is designed to assess a candidate's ability to orally translate a written document, for example, a court order, a medical leaflet or a letter from school, from the source to the target language.
- c) Written translation: this part of the exam is dedicated to assessing the candidate's translation skills by using public service-related document to demonstrate mastery of written register and specialist terminology.
- d) Ethics and code of conduct: a written task or exam that tests the candidate's knowledge of the ethics and the code of conduct, typically based on the NRPSI guidelines.

This formal and holistic testing approach will ensure that candidates are not only fluent in their chosen languages but also skilled practitioners who can navigate the complex cognitive and ethical demands of their role as interpreters. DPSI is a benchmark for professionalism, ethics, and competence

The following table shows the steps and requirements of obtaining this qualification.

Table (1): DPSI Course Key Information

Aim	To develop competent interpreters who can facilitate communication in public service settings
Content	The course has two main options: (a) Health, (b) Law, and (c) Local Government. The course covers language proficiency, interpreting skills, ethics, and specific terminology related to sectors of candidate choice, like healthcare, legal, and social services.
Duration	Usually ranges from 6 months to 1 year, depending on the delivery mode. Whether course is held face to face or online, full-time or part-time
Assessment	Exam includes written and oral components, interpreting tests (consecutive and simultaneous)
Languages	Available for various languages; English is generally a requirement
Cost	The cost can be between £600 to £900 equivalent to \$750-\$1000

Source: CIOL DPSI Overview (2025)

DPSI is recognised in the UK as a standard qualification for public service interpreters. Currently the NHS in the UK emphasises that using trained interpreters is not optional, it is a requirement to meet legal obligations under the Equality Act 2010 and the Human Rights Act 1998. The guidance from NHS England (2023) positions trained interpreters as an integral part of the clinical team to protect patient safety, dignity, and their right to equitable care. In short, using anything less than a trained professional interpreter compromises patient care, exposes the clinician and trust to legal risk, and ultimately costs the system more. It is a non-negotiable standard for a modern, equitable healthcare system.

Similarly, legal institutions in the UK such as courts and police prioritise professional interpreters and impose certain criteria for recruiting interpreters. Guidance from authoritative bodies is unequivocal. The Ministry of Justice (2011) in the UK explicitly warns against the use of ad hoc interpreters in criminal proceedings, stating that children, other witnesses, or victims should never be used. Similarly, NHS England (2023) guidance for commissioners frames professional interpreting as a non-negotiable component of clinical governance and patient safety. Furthermore, the guidance of both legal and health organisations clearly states that the use of ad hoc

interpreters is highly discouraged. It is seen as a significant professional risk and a potential failure in the duty to achieve the best evidence, ultimately undermining the course of justice.

Professional Bodies and Accreditation

Joining a professional body is a critical step in career development, providing credibility, networking, and professional support. Registration is essential for overcoming the disadvantages of being an ad hoc interpreter. Professional interpreters are strongly encouraged to register with NRPSI (National Register for Public Service Interpreting) to ensure quality and public protection. Another professional body is CIOL (Chartered Institute of Linguists) which offers membership pathways and qualifications that are highly recognised across the language sector. Interpreters can also join ITI (Institute of Translation and Interpreting). This is a professional body for translators and interpreters which offers graded membership and a directory for clients.

Joining one of these bodies is important for many reasons. First, for networking. It is the most powerful networking tool available, connecting you directly with the largest clients and most respected professionals in your field. Second, for Career Growth. It is the gateway to the most prestigious and well-paid assignments in the legal, medical, and public sectors. Third, for Professionalism. It transforms you from a "bilingual person who interprets" into a "qualified public service interpreter," with all the credibility, trust, and responsibility that title entails, (National Register of Public Service Interpreters, n.d.).

Ad hoc Interpreters - Intruders

Ad hoc interpreters, also known as non-professional interpreters are individuals who provide interpreting services without formal training or qualifications. While they may be bilingual, they often lack the skills and knowledge necessary to accurately and ethically convey complex information, especially in sensitive situations like healthcare or legal proceedings. Using non-professional interpreters can lead to misunderstandings, errors, and even harm to the individuals involved. Hale (2007) extensively documents the risks of using ad hoc interpreters, including omissions, additions, and role confusion, particularly in legal and medical settings, which can lead to serious consequences. Ad hoc interpreters may hold to their own views, ask their own questions, or alter messages to what they believe the client or professional needs to hear, thereby changing the discourse (Cambridge, 1999).

In the fast-moving world, public service institutions occasionally encounter clients with little knowledge and proficiency in the dominant language. To avoid this situation, a professional, trained interpreter which is often perceived as costly, logically challenging, or unnecessary for "simple" communication (Cambridge, 1999). This conception has caused a gap frequently filled by ad hoc interpreters. Those interpreters are bilinguals perform the role without formal training, or proper understanding of the code of ethics. While well-intentioned, ad hoc interpreters operate at the "crossways between natural, professional, novice and expert interpreting" (Boéri, 2012, p. 183). This paper critically examines the consequences of this practice, claiming that the use of ad hoc interpreters on a regular basis compromises the core principles of public service delivery and exposes everyone to significant latent dangers.

Ad hoc interpreters have been widely criticised for their inadequacy and critical miscommunication. Information loss in bilingual medical interviews is very common when using untrained interpreters (Cambridge, 1999). An ad hoc interpreter is a temporary or improvised interpreter used in circumstances where a professional interpreter is not available. Interpreters in general are often exposed to deeply traumatic narratives, such as accounts from refugees, serious health complications survivors of violence, or victims of abuse. For an ad hoc interpreter, this could cause extensive mental health and emotional well-being concerns as they lack adequate training to be able to deal with such traumatic experiences. Constant exposure to such experiences, can and will eventually lead to emotional strain, vicarious trauma, and burnout. Ad hoc interpreters will not only have to convey the words but also process the intense emotional weight behind them, and because they lack proper training and knowledge, they are certainly unable to deal effectively with these experiences.

From the researcher's observations in the UK, Interpreting always seems to attract a significant number of migrants in the UK. This is true especially those who have a foundation in formal education, often including advanced degrees like a master's or doctorate degrees. However, in realities they lack knowledge of interpreting skills and the general ethics involved. In the UK many Arab postgraduates tend to apply for interpreting roles as an extra source of income. They feel confident that their English proficiency is sufficient to become a good interpreter. However, their interpreting service is always seen as ineffective and prone to potentially serious interpreting errors due to lack of training and limited terminology. The following table shows the disadvantages of being an ad hoc interpreter.

From Ad-Hoc to Professional Interpreter

This paper calls on ad hoc interpreters to initiate change in their profession. The transition from an ad-hoc interpreter to a professional is not merely a change in title, it is a major shift in mindset, skill set, and practice taking into account that the innate bilingual ability is the starting point. This paper suggests some formal steps to effect change as follows:

1. Formal education and rigorous training. Achieving formal qualifications, such as university degrees or specialized diplomas in interpreting this will provide the essential theoretical knowledge and practical interpreting and translation skills which ad-hoc interpreters lack.
2. Certification and validation are crucial in a field where trust is paramount, third-party validation is fundamental. Achieving formal certification from recognized professional bodies (e.g., CIOL, EU institutions) ensures competence and opens doors to more well-paid jobs prospects.
3. Firm Ethical Commitment. Interpreters are bound by strict rules to keep all information acquired during an assignment private. They must remain unbiased and objective, acting as a neutral bridge for communication. Adherence to a strict code of ethics especially confidentiality, impartiality, and accuracy is non-negotiable. This professional discipline is what allows interpreters to navigate sensitive legal, medical, and corporate settings with integrity.
4. Continuous professional development. To become professional, ad hoc interpreters must commit to lifelong learning, specializing in their chosen field for example legal, medical, or conference interpreting. They need to actively involve in training practices in order to maintain linguistic agility, expand their glossaries, and stay current with industry trends.

In summary, the shift from ad-hoc to professional is a journey from being a passive bilingual to an active, skilled, and ethical communication expert. It requires determined efforts, discipline, and mastering complex language and terminology. Those who are passionate to undertake this shift in their profession will reap the rewards of a fulfilling and respected career.

Table (2): The Disadvantages of Being An Ad Hoc Interpreter

Lack of training	They do not have formal training in interpretation or translation skills, leading to potential inaccuracies
Limited terminology knowledge	They may lack specialized vocabulary e.g technical, medical, or legal contexts
Bias and personal opinions	Ad hoc interpreters may unintentionally impose personal biases or opinions, affecting objectivity
Confidentiality concerns	They might not be bound by professional confidentiality standards, risking privacy breaches
Inconsistency	Their performance can vary significantly, affecting the quality of communication
Miscommunication	Due to inaccuracies, misunderstandings or misinterpretations

Source: Boéri, J. C. L. (2009)

In conclusion, while ad hoc interpreters can be useful in emergencies in cases a professional interpreter cannot be found, relying on them for important or sensitive information can compromise accuracy and confidentiality. The use of ad hoc interpreters is a high-risk practice that compromises the quality, safety, and ethics of public services. It leads to inaccurate communication, breaches fundamental ethical principles, and places an unfair burden on vulnerable individuals. Framing this as a simple matter of convenience or cost-effectiveness is a dangerous fallacy. The evidence clearly demonstrates that the true cost is borne by the limited-proficiency client in the form of inferior care and injustice, and by the ad hoc interpreter in the form of psychological distress. This paper provides recommendations on how to shift from ad hoc to professional interpreters. Investing in professional interpreting services is, therefore, not an expense but an essential investment in equity, safety, and the very integrity of our public institutions.

The Importance of This Study

Becoming a professional interpreter in the UK matters because it directly enables people to access justice, healthcare and public services, protects vulnerable people, supports business and education, and strengthens community cohesion. Professional interpreters make communication accurate, fair and safe and they help

institutions meet legal and ethical duties. This paper is important because it highlights the importance of becoming a professional interpreter, or at least it encourages ad hoc interpreters to proceed to become professionals. The following are some key facts as to why becoming a professional interpreter in the UK matters. First, access to justice venues such as courts, tribunals, police and legal services rely on qualified interpreters to ensure fair trials and proper legal process. Currently many governmental organisations such as Police, Courts, and the NHS (National Health Service) employ professional and competent interpreters who can fulfil certain requirements. One significant requirement to be employed as an interpreter is to hold a DPSI, Ministry of Justice. (2011).

Second, patient safety and healthcare equity. In clinical settings, professional interpreters reduce medical errors, improve diagnosis and treatment adherence, and protect patient confidentiality. NHS guidance and best practice increasingly expect accredited interpreting for complex consultations (Office for Health Improvement and Disparities, 2017). Third, access to public services and rights. Local authorities, immigration and welfare services need interpreters, so people understand their rights and entitlements. This supports lawful decision-making and reduces social exclusion. Fourth, safeguarding and protection. Trained interpreters follow confidentiality and safeguarding protocols in vulnerable-person cases (children, victims of crime, trafficking, etc.), ensuring information is conveyed safely and ethically. Fifth, standards, ethics and public trust. Professional interpreters follow codes of conduct (accuracy, impartiality, confidentiality), reducing harm from poor or ad hoc interpreting and building public trust in services.

A strict code of conduct is a set of rules or guidelines that outlines expectations for behaviour and performance within an organisation. These codes may cover areas such as dresswear, communication protocols, and work ethics. Indeed, code of conduct is an essential aspect of many organisations and institutions in the UK, which might not be common for Arab interpreters. For example, when the researcher was employed in the NHS, he was told that wearing trainers, jeans or tracksuits are not allowed. Sharing personal information e.g. phone number, email or an address, with the end users (clients) is completely unacceptable. Let alone giving them a lift in your car or offering advice.

For instance, the researcher witnessed a few Arab interpreters breaching some of these ethics. Most of whom were ad hoc interpreters. Some of these breaches were based on cultural practices and religious beliefs. Breaches include failing to maintain impartiality by offering advice and recommendations to the clients and asking clients personal questions outside interpreting context compromising confidentiality. For many interpreters especially those unprofessional, adhering to the code of ethics can be a huge task. The researcher believes that there is a cultural link to this issue. Hospitality and generosity are some of the prominent virtues of the Arabs, and due to these personal and cultural values ad hoc interpreters often feel they are required to offer personal support and therefore fail to follow these rules. Therefore, this paper emphasizes that proper training and deep awareness of the profession are essential for ad hoc interpreters. Only then new improved practices and adherence to the ethics and rules of the profession will be guaranteed.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Becoming a professional interpreter in the UK is a crucially important process. It requires a transition from being a bilingual individual to a trained, accredited, and ethical practitioner. The pathway is clearly discussed in this paper, it begins with the recognition that interpreting is a distinct profession, proceeds through formal education and specialised training. Then the process is validated and accredited by a relevant professional body and is sustained by a commitment to continuous development. As globalisation and migration continue to shape the British society, the role of the professional interpreter as a guarantor of accurate communication and access to justice and public services remains critical.

This paper looked deeply into the requirements of becoming a professional interpreter in the UK. The researcher relied on two main sources of literature, first available literature on becoming a professional interpreter, and second the researcher's experience and observations as a professional interpreter in the UK for 8 years. It was found that relevant degrees in interpreting are essential, in addition achieving a DPSI is favourable for many organisations. The process of obtaining DPSI degree and costs involved was discussed in this paper. DPSI was found fundamental if an interpreter is interested in working with the NHS, Police, Tribunal and Sheriff Courts. This paper has also shown the disadvantages of being an ad hoc interpreter and the high risk of causing severe consequences such as critical miscommunication in medical and legal settings, breaches of confidentiality, and the resulting professional liability and systemic injustices that arise from these errors. It was found that using an ad hoc interpreter is a high-risk practice that compromises safety, justice, and dignity for everyone involved. Therefore, practical suggestions and recommendations for a phased transition from ad hoc to professional were offered.

Lastly, the study puts the following recommendations for becoming a professional interpreter:

- 1- Build language competence: near-native ability in both languages and cultural awareness.
- 2- Acquire qualifications: consider MA courses, for example MA in Conference Interpreting or Diploma in Public Service Interpreting (DPSI).
- 3- Register and join bodies for networking: register with NRPSI national register for public service interpreting and join professional bodies such as CIOL Chartered Institute of Linguists.
- 4- Gain specialist skills: legal, medical, conference or community interpreting training, interpreting techniques, ethics and confidentiality.
- 5- Meet practical requirements: DBS check (Disclosure and Barring Service), professional indemnity insurance, adherence to codes of conduct.
- 6- Build experience: ad hoc and new interpreters are advised to volunteer, shadow professionals, and seek CPD (continued professional development) training courses. This is essential to maintain and improve their skills, stay current with language and subject matter knowledge.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

The author(s) declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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