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## **Teaching Translation in Ukraine: An Empirical Project**

### **ABSTRACT**

The article reports a study in line with the tenets of empirical methodology in addressing research questions. The project tests how real respondents in Ukraine, both university students and professionals, view the job of a translator / interpreter. The results indicate that there is a significant difference between the responses of the two test groups, which points out to the fact that the attitude to the job dramatically changes with acquiring the experience.

*Key words: translator, translators' training, empirical research methods.*

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Translation is an occupation currently in crisis in Ukraine. With the country in the process of building solid relations with, or even becoming a member of various international organizations, it is hazardous that it lacks skilled translators, service and conference interpreters. The principal reasons for this situation are hidden in the existing system of translators' / interpreters' education as well as in the general attitude to the job as the one that hardly requires any other skills beyond mere foreign language knowledge. On the

contrary, being a translator / interpreter is a combination of personal qualities, profound professional training and practical experience.

Unlike many other trades, it is impossible to learn to be an interpreter by self-study or by simple reading of books. This is the profession where high quality formal education is, if not indispensable, then at least strongly recommended. Often stemming from the Russian tradition (Миньяр-Белоручев, 1980; Комиссаров, 1990; Караева, 2006), the Ukrainian school of Translation Studies has been rich in deep theoretic basis (Гудманян, 1999; Мирам, Гон, 2003; Miram et al., 2006; Чередниченко, 2007). Yet on a more practical level, translation / interpretation teaching at Ukrainian universities is far from being adequate.

On the one hand, there exists an obvious misbalance between the number of translators / interpreters the country needs and the thousands of yearly graduates who cannot find or often do not seek professional employment. Some figures may illustrate the situation. Each year at least 150 people graduate from Kyiv National Linguistic University with a degree in Translation Studies (Ukrainian-English). It is no secret that many other institutions in the country, and even in Kyiv itself, offer the same degree. All in all, by a very rough estimate, at least 1,000 Ukrainian-English translators enter the market in Ukraine each year, a total of 10,000 in 10 years – a figure that looks absurd against the number of job vacancies in the world.

On the other hand, the standard of academic education in the field often leaves much to be desired. Generally, insufficient professional skills of local translators / interpreters may be explained by the following main reasons:

(1) predominantly academic approach to foreign language learning at language departments of universities;

(2) the trend to combine pedagogical and translator' education as there exists a general presupposition that knowing a foreign language automatically means being a translator;

(3) absence of any post-graduate professional training opportunities for translators / interpreters (Chesnokova, Miram, 2010).

At Ukrainian universities, students, with rare exception, are trained as written translators, facing challenges of addressing social and political (Борисова, Колесник), special (Карабан, 2002), literary (Лучук, 1996; Рихлю, 2001), or business texts. Consecutive interpretation courses, though well supported with quality literature (Мирам, 2001; Гон et al., 2007), are deficient in their depth: the number of academic hours allowed is insufficient and the number of students in a group – as many as 15 to one teacher – does not let the lecturer address the needs of an individual learner.

The situation with teaching simultaneous interpretation is much worse. In spite of excellent methodological background (Мирам et al., 2007; Мирам et al., 2010), only rare universities dare offer the course due to ubiquitous lack of modern professional equipment the course requires and professional professors who are ready to handle tutoring.

Yet these are today's students who will, eventually, serve Ukraine in establishing language contacts with international partners of all levels, and the quality of education in the field as well as the objective level of new-comers to the market play a crucial role in creating the image of Ukraine as a European country.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

With these observations in mind, we decided to take an objective look at how students, majoring in Translation Studies, view their future profession, and how this vision changes once they get ‘in the field’.

The paper reports a study in line with the tenets of empirical methodology in addressing research questions. The project tests how real respondents from Ukraine, both university students and professionals, view the job of a translator / interpreter.

In the reported research, 75 participants filled in the specially designed questionnaires for the two experimental groups, comprising 17 questions about the respondents’ expectations, experiences and practice of being in the field. The questionnaires for the two groups differed slightly and were customised to fit the samples.

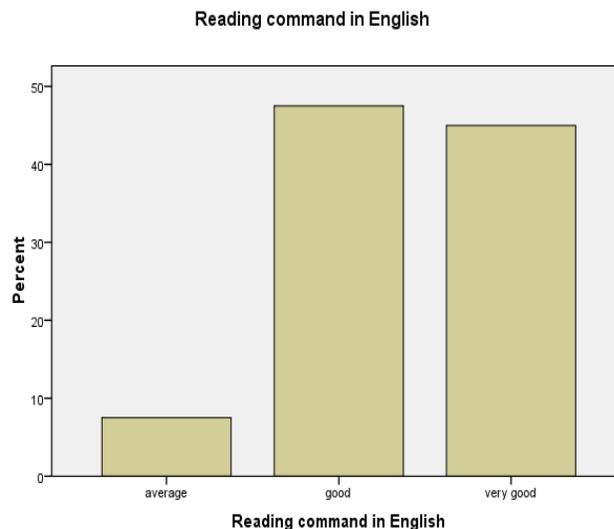
### **2.1. Participants**

Group 1 consisted of 41 respondents (7.3 % male and 92.7 % female, all younger than 30) who were students majoring in Translation Studies from two universities: Kyiv National Linguistic University and the Humanities Institute of National Aviation University.

Group 2 included 34 respondents (44.1 % male and 55.9 % female; 94.1 % younger than 40), all professionals with the experience of 1 to almost 50 years in various fields of the profession – from translation of standard documents to top-level conference interpretation on the governmental level. The gender proportion of the participants in Group 2, compared to that of

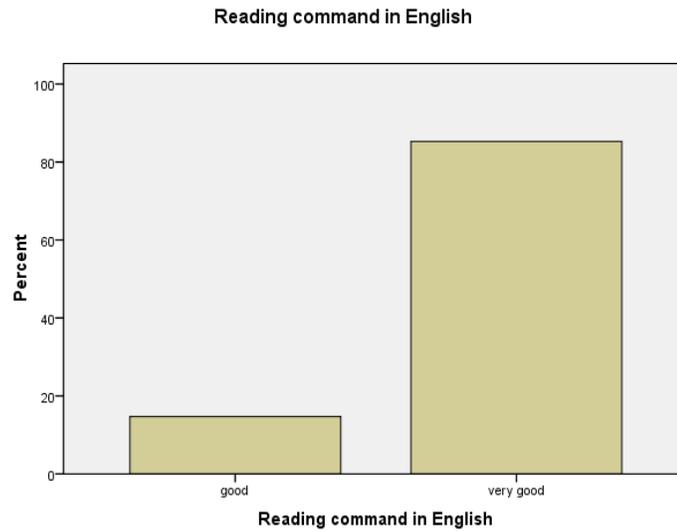
Group 1, clearly demonstrates that in Ukraine men and women have unequal chances of getting a position in the job market.

Aiming at getting a better picture of the samples, *self*-assessment of foreign language skills of participants of both groups was checked as the factor which has secured or will potentially secure them a job position. The language level of students turned out to be considerably lower than that of professionals though, being mostly undergraduates, respondents in Group 1 could hypothetically get in the market in less than a year. For instance, 8 % of students in self-assessment of their reading command in English indicated ‘average’, 47 %, ‘good’, and only 45 %, ‘very good’ (see Figure 1 below).



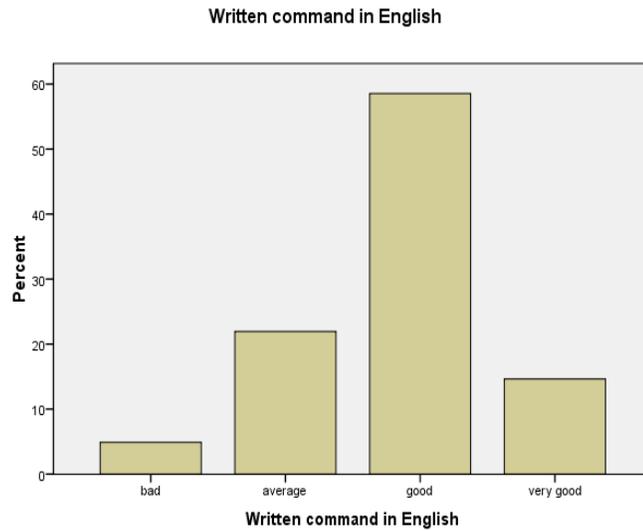
**Figure 1. Self-assessment of reading command in English in Group 1 (students)**

In the group of professionals, the following proportion was measured: 17 % indicated the ‘good’ level, and 83 %, ‘very good’ (see Figure 2).



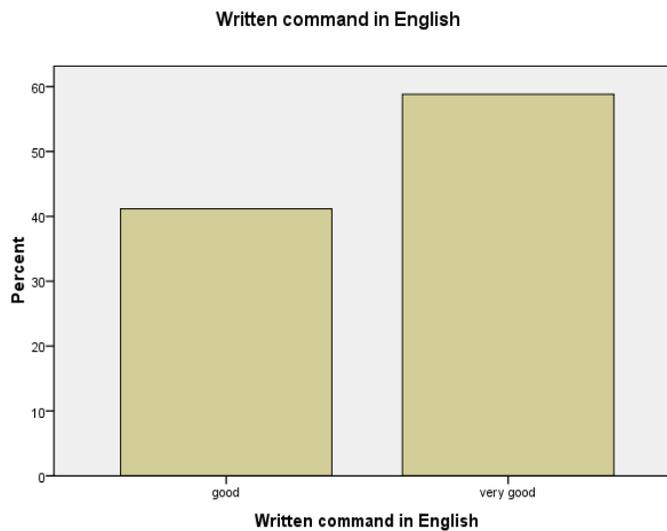
**Figure 2. Self-assessment of reading command in English in Group 2 (professionals)**

The *self*-assessment level of participants' written skills in English appeared to be the following. In Group 1, 5 % of respondents indicated it as 'bad'; 22 %, as 'average'; 58 %, as 'good', and only 15 % as 'very good' (see Figure 3).



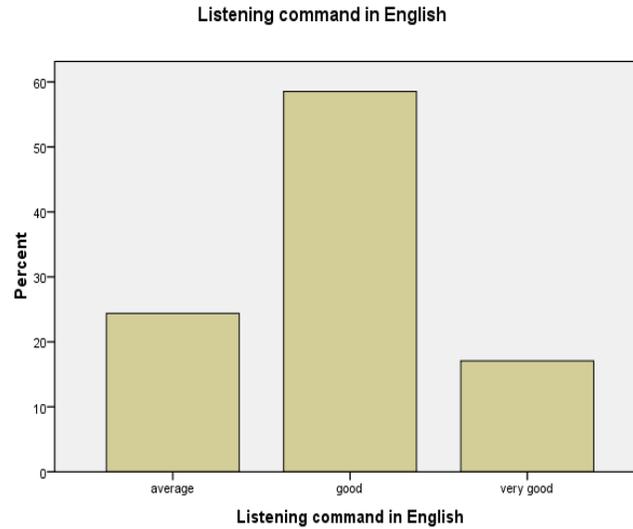
**Figure 3. Self- assessment of written command in English in Group 1 (students)**

In the group of professionals, 42 % indicated the corresponding skill as ‘good’, and 58 %, as ‘very good’ (see Figure 4).



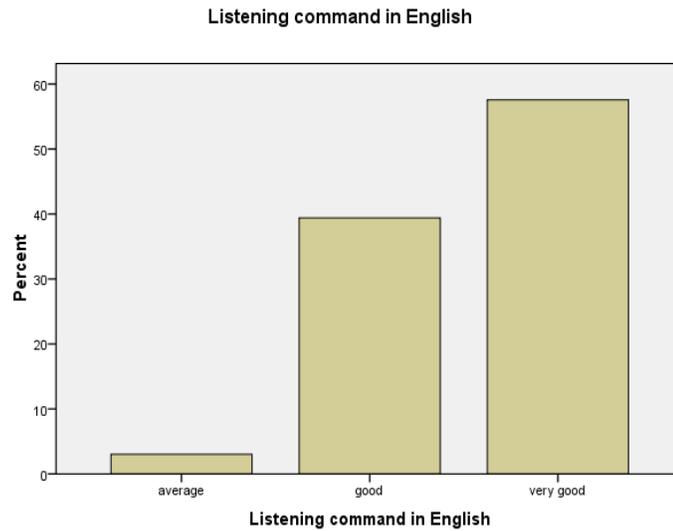
**Figure 4. Self-assessment of written command in English in Group 2 (professionals)**

Similarly different are the *self*-assessment data of the two experimental groups, regarding their listening skills. 25 % of students believe that it is ‘average’; 58 %, ‘good’ and 17 %, ‘very good’ (see Figure 5).



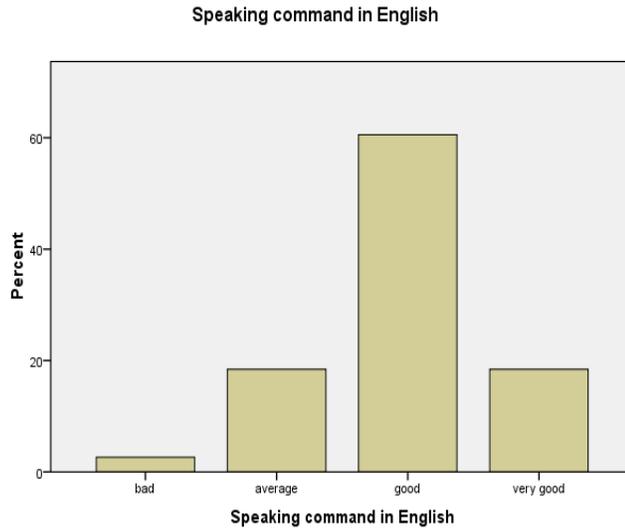
**Figure 5. Self-assessment of listening command in English in Group 1 (students)**

The self-assessment of listening skills of professional translators appeared to be the following: 3 % marked is at ‘average’ (obviously these are written translators); 40 %, as ‘good’, and 57 %, as ‘very good’ (see Figure 6).



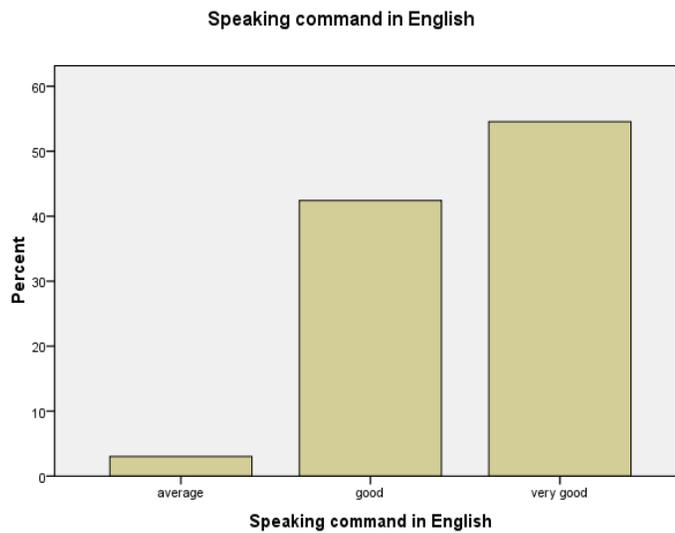
**Figure 6. Self-assessment of listening command in English in Group 2 (professionals)**

Speaking skills of the research participants of the two test groups were also self-assessed rather differently. 3 % of students believe that they can speak English ‘bad[ly]’; 20 % do it on an ‘average’ level; 60 %, on a ‘good’ level, and only 17 % admit that their EFL speaking skills are ‘very good’ (see Figure 7).



**Figure 7. Self-assessment of speaking command in English in Group 1 (students)**

In the group of professionals, the distribution of answers is the following (see Figure 8): 3 % assessed their level of speaking English as ‘average’ (possibly being written translators); 42 %, as ‘good’; and 55 %, as ‘very good’.



**Figure 8. Self-assessment  
of speaking command in English in Group 2 (professionals)**

Remarkably, respondents from the two experimental groups gave noticeably different answers to the question about their mother tongue (with the options ‘Russian’, ‘Ukrainian’ or ‘other’) – an important issue in continuous debates about the language policy of Ukraine and its impact on education in particular (Chesnokova and Sergeyeva, 2011). In the group of professionals, 87.9 % indicated Russian and 51.5 % Ukrainian as their native language (the respondents could choose more than one variant). In the students group, the percentage was 51.2 % and 78 % respectively, which lends support to the tendency to Ukrainization of higher education in this bi-lingual county.

With the view of generalizing the sample, the respondents learning strategies in mastering translation skills were assessed. For this reason, the participants were asked about the materials they have been presented to and encouraged to use in the course of formal translation education. The following options were offered: ‘bilingual dictionaries’, ‘corpora’, ‘grammar books’, ‘Internet’, ‘monolingual dictionaries’, and ‘others’.

Two variables (‘Internet’ and ‘monolingual dictionaries’) yielded statistically significant results in comparison between Group 1 and Group 2. The Internet was a learning tool in Translation Studies for 83 % of students and for only 60 % of professionals. On the contrary, the latter used monolingual dictionaries more often (78 % of respondents in Group 2 against just 55 % of participants in Group 1). We thus may assume that professional

translators had been working with language as such more, and this was one of the factors that brought them to the professional market.

## **2.2. Procedure**

The participants were invited to fill in the questionnaires either by hand or on-line. At this stage, the setting was not taken into consideration. In the main part of the questionnaire, the respondents were asked to indicate how much they agreed with the following statements about the job of a translator:

- ‘It is more difficult to translate texts into my mother tongue’;
- ‘Being a translator involves much more than mastering any pair of languages’;
- ‘Formal education is enough to become a professional’;
- ‘I would like to have more retraining possibilities after graduation’;
- ‘In order to become a translator, one needs practical experience in addition to pursuing formal education’;
- ‘Anyone who has an excellent command of his / her mother tongue and of a foreign language may work as a translator’;
- ‘Translating texts into a foreign language is easier for me’ and
- ‘I do not think I need to take any other courses after I graduate.’

Obviously, some statements are self-repeating in the meaning. In this way accidental or socially desired answers of research participants were filtered. The respondents were invited to choose one of the following

variants: ‘strongly disagree’, ‘disagree’, ‘undecided’, ‘agree’ and ‘strongly agree’.

The data were then processed with the help of the computer programme SPSS for Windows, Version 17.0 in line with the standards of applying scientific research methods in the Humanities (ЧЕШОКОВА, 2011). The analysis was conducted with the help of one-way ANOVA parametric test. The comparison was held between groups with the ‘occupation’ variable (‘student’ or ‘professional’) as the main factor.

### **3. RESULTS AND CONCLUSION**

The results indicate that there is a significant difference between the responses of the students and the professionals test groups, which points out to the fact that the attitude to the profession dramatically changes with acquiring the experience, and the knowledge a university can give is NOT, as a rule, enough to enter the highly competitive job market of translation in Ukraine.

Three variables out of eight yielded statistically significant results: ‘It is more difficult to translate texts into my mother tongue’ ( $p = 0.004$ ), ‘Translating texts into a foreign language is easier for me’ (filter question,  $p = 0.018$ ) and ‘In order to become a translator, one needs practical experience in addition to pursuing formal education’ ( $p = 0.008$ ).

Figures 9 и 10 illustrate the distribution of data of two experimental groups in the variable ‘It is more difficult to translate texts into my mother tongue’. As shown in Figure 9, 23 % of students ‘strongly disagree’ with the claim, and 68 %, ‘disagree’.

**Figure. 9. Responses of Group 1 in the variable  
'It is more difficult to translate texts into my mother tongue'**

By contrast, in the group of professionals, not more than 18 % 'strongly disagree' with the claim, and 32 %, 'disagree' (see Figure 10). Professional translators, especially conference interpreters, fairly often believe that it is easier to translate *into* a foreign language, as in this case they for sure understand all the nuances of the source text meaning.

**Figure. 10. Responses of Group 2 in the variable  
'It is more difficult to translate texts into my mother tongue'**

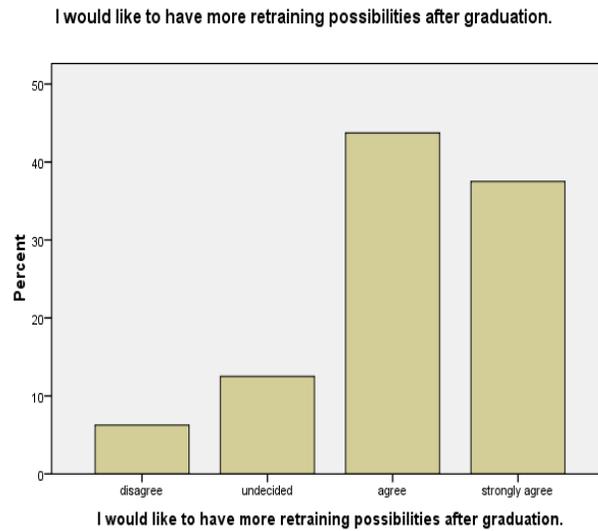
The difference between the responses of students and professionals test groups in the variable 'In order to become a translator, one needs practical experience in addition to pursuing formal education' also turned out to be statistically significant. The distribution of data in the experimental groups is illustrated in Figures 11 and 12. As shown in Figure 11, in Group 1, as many as 9 % of respondents labelled themselves as 'undecided' and only 49 % as those that 'strongly agree' with the claim.

**Figure 11. Responses of Group 1 in the variable  
'In order to become a translator, one needs practical experience  
in addition to pursuing formal education'**

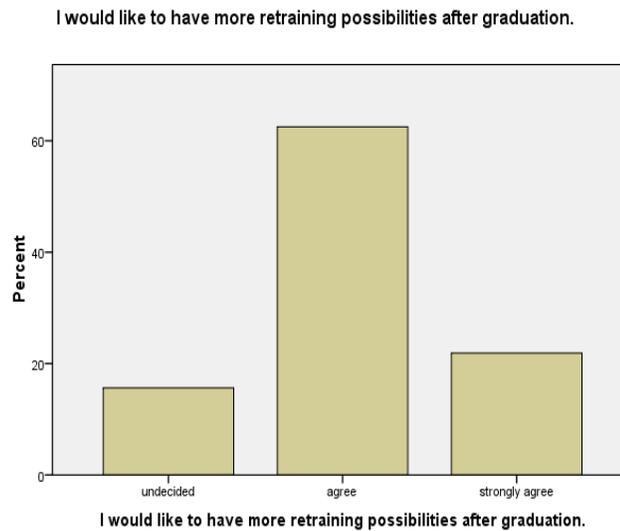
In Group 2 (see Figure 12), the number of respondents who 'strongly agree[d]' to the claim increased to 80 %, obviously acknowledging to the value of field work.

**Figure. 12. Responses of Group 2 in the variable  
'In order to become a translator, one needs practical experience  
in addition to pursuing formal education'**

Similarly, in the variable 'I would like to have more retraining possibilities after graduation', which showed the tendency to statistical significance, 7 % of respondents in Group 1 (students) have chosen 'disagree' as their answer (see Figure 13), while in Group 2 (professionals) mostly 'agree' and 'strongly agree' options were marked (see Figure 14). The data distribution indicates insufficiency of translators' formal education in the country, which will clearly bear further investigation.



**Figure. 13. Responses of Group 1 in the variable ‘I would like to have more retraining possibilities after graduation’**



**Figure. 14. Responses of Group 2 in the variable ‘I would like to have more retraining possibilities after graduation’**

More research is needed to confirm these observations and to see whether other factors, like the respondents’ nationality or cultural background

influence the attitudes attached to the translators' / interpreters' trade. For now though the results seem to prove the hypothesis that the quality of education in the field requires thorough revision.

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