



A first for DCU – Graduate Certificate in Community Interpreting

Another aspect of interculturalism in Ireland is the growing need for trained community interpreters, as Mary Phelan explains.

What is community interpreting? It's the type of interpreting that takes place in hospitals, schools, Garda stations and the Courts. It also happens on Safepass courses, in registry offices and for driving licence theory tests. According to the Central Statistics Office, 750,000 people from 211 countries have come to live in Ireland since 2000. Ten per cent of the population was born outside Ireland. Of course, a proportion of this 10 per cent is made up of native English speakers, but a considerable number are not native English speakers and may in fact have limited proficiency in English. This means that in many situations they will need an interpreter.

Interpreting is not an easy task. The interpreter listens to what is said in one language, if necessary takes notes, and repeats what has been said in the target language. There should be no omissions or additions to the information. In medical settings the interpreter is all too often a family member or friend. While some patients may like the comfort provided by a friend, the problem is that friends may be embarrassed by some medical conditions and may not have the necessary vocabulary to be able to interpret accurately. This may affect the doctor's diagnosis and could also be an issue where informed consent is concerned. In cases of domestic violence or sexual abuse the abuser could be the interpreter.

The Health Service Executive (HSE) has made some attempts to provide paid interpreters for GPs in certain areas of the country. Some hospitals also have contracts with translation agencies to provide interpreters. This sounds very good in theory but in practice these interpreters have no training at all in interpreting and their interpreting ability is not tested. Some paid interpreters may well be excellent but a large

percentage is not. Even those interpreters who are conscientious and prepare for assignments may not know how to behave in certain situations. For example, if an interpreter is familiar with a patient's case history, he or she may be tempted to add in extra information for the benefit of the doctor. But it is up to the patient, not the interpreter, to decide what he or she wants to say.

Similarly, the Gardaí and the Courts are working with people who are untrained and untested. The accuracy of statements taken in Garda stations and of testimonies interpreted in court has to be questioned. Miscarriages of justice happen when there is no language barrier; the chances of them happening have to be higher when interpreting is involved.

The lack of training for interpreters working in Ireland is the reason why the Graduate Certificate in Community Interpreting was set up at DCU in 2004. The course is delivered part time on Thursday evenings and Saturdays to encourage working interpreters to register. There are four modules: introduction to interpreting practice, ethics, terminology and interpreting practice. To date our graduates cover French, Russian and Spanish. We hope to run Polish in September 2006.

We would very much like to have more students on the course, but we have run into a couple of problems. Interpreters are freelance and do not earn a huge amount of money. Because the course is part time our students cannot obtain any grant to cover the fees. At present anyone can work as an interpreter so there is no incentive to obtain a qualification. We need public bodies like the HSE, the Gardaí and the Courts Service to start demanding standards rather than just looking for people who speak another language.