

International Certification Study: The United States

By Jiri Stejskal

The International Certification Study was launched in the pages of the *ATA Chronicle* exactly two years ago. Many countries have been covered since then, and even though there are other countries with credentialing procedures in place that have not been described in this study, the author believes the column has provided a comprehensive and insightful review of credentialing procedures worldwide. Based on the feedback received from readers, it seems sensible to conclude the study with an exploration of the credentialing possibilities in the U.S. After we reviewed the certification procedures in the Arab countries in the last issue, we now turn our focus to procedures employed by various government and professional organizations within the U.S.

The following contributors were kind enough to share their expertise on the subject:

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Contrary to popular belief, there are many credentialing possibilities for both translators and interpreters in the U.S. We will not describe the T&I academic programs¹ as we have done with some other countries, but rather explore what is available in the U.S. at the nonacademic level. As was mentioned above, credentials can be granted by either the U.S. government or by a professional organization.

At the government level, there is a rigorous federal examination for judiciary interpreters in Spanish, Navajo, and Haitian-Creole.² Other credentials can be granted to applicants by various federal agencies upon successful completion of qualification requirements; however, in such cases, the credentials attained apply only to the specific agency granting such a qualification. For example, the Department

of State tests its own translators and interpreters. On the state level, the National Center for State Courts, with 29 member states currently constituting the Consortium for State Court Interpreter Certification, offers certification. Some individual state agencies also have their own programs. For example, the Department of Social & Health Services in Washington State provides a low-level screening program for translators and interpreters in social services.

Credentials that can be obtained through professional associations also vary in their scope and credibility. Among the narrowly specialized is the certification recently developed by the National Association of Judiciary Interpreters and Translators (NAJIT), which currently certifies judiciary translators and interpreters in Spanish. The Translators and Interpreters Guild, essentially a trade union, also uses its own certification program, based on recommendations and review, for its referral service. Finally, the most widely recognized credential for translators in the U.S. is ATA's accreditation program. We will now take a closer look at selected credentials administered both by the government and professional organizations. Given the significance and the very recent developments within ATA's accreditation program, we will devote a full article to this topic in the next issue.

Federal Court Interpreter Certification Program

The Federal Court Interpreter Certification Exam (FCICE) is administered under contract from the Administrative Office of the United States Courts with the National Center for State Courts, in cooperation with CPS Human Resource Services (www.cps.ca.gov) and Second Language Testing, Inc. ➡

(www.2lti.com), respectively. The information below was taken directly from the Federal Court Interpreter Program website: www.uscourts.gov/interpretprog/interp_prog.html.³ A detailed description of the FCICE for the Spanish language, as well as the test dates and locations, is available at www.cps.ca.gov/fcice-spanish/eh.htm. Finally, for those who are curious about the earnings of federal interpreters, see www.uscourts.gov/interpretprog/rates.html.

The Court Interpreters Act, 28 U.S.C. §1827, requires the Director of the Administrative Office of the United States Courts to prescribe, determine, and certify the qualifications of persons who serve as certified interpreters in federal courts when the Director considers such certification to be merited for either persons who are hearing impaired (whether or not they also are speech impaired) or persons who speak only or primarily a language other than English. The use of competent federal court interpreters in proceedings involving speakers of languages other than English is critical to ensure that justice is carried out fairly for defendants and other stakeholders.

The single greatest operational requirement in the federal courts is for Spanish-language interpreters. However, there is also a need for interpreters in other languages, including Chinese (Mandarin, Cantonese, and Foochow), Vietnamese, Korean, Russian, and Arabic.⁴ The need for specific language interpreters is determined by the local district courts and not by the Administrative Office. However, in accordance with the Court Interpreters Act, the Administrative Office prescribes the standards and guidelines for selecting and using interpreters in federal court proceedings.

The Administrative Office classifies three categories of interpreters:

1. **Certified interpreters.** Certified interpreters have passed the Administrative Office certification examination. To date, certification programs have been developed for Spanish, Navajo, and Haitian-Creole. In these languages, the courts will only select from available interpreters those who have met the Administrative Office's criteria for certification. The Administrative Office's certification examination is administered in two phases and includes written and oral tests that, among other things, measure a candidate's ability to accurately perform simultaneous as well as consecutive interpretation and sight translations as encountered in the federal courts.

In languages other than Spanish, Navajo, and Haitian-Creole, interpreters are designated as "professionally qualified" or "language skilled."

2. **"Professionally qualified" interpreters.** There are two ways in which one can be designated as "professionally qualified." An individual with previous employment as a conference or seminar interpreter with any United States agency or with the United Nations or a similar entity may be deemed "professionally qualified" if the condition for employment includes successfully passing an interpreter examination. Another way to be deemed "professionally qualified" is to be a member in good standing in a professional interpreter association that requires a minimum of 50 hours of conference interpreting experience in the language(s) of expertise and the sponsorship of three active

members of the same association, who have been members for at least two years and whose language(s) are the same as the applicant's, and who will attest to having witnessed the applicant's performance and to the accuracy of the statements on the application. Individuals who can demonstrate to the local court that they are eligible in either of these two ways can be classified as "professionally qualified."

3. **Language-skilled interpreters.** Interpreters who are not certified (Spanish, Navajo, or Haitian-Creole) or considered "professionally qualified," as described above, but who can demonstrate to the satisfaction of the court their ability to effectively interpret from the foreign language into English and vice versa in court proceedings, can be classified as "language skilled" interpreters.⁵

Certified and "professionally qualified" interpreters are paid at a higher rate than "language-skilled" interpreters. Individuals who are interested in becoming federal court interpreters in Spanish, Navajo, or Haitian-Creole must successfully pass the federal court interpreter test battery. For other languages, individuals may contact local federal courts to determine if that court has a need for their language of expertise. To be considered a "professionally qualified" interpreter, an individual must submit a resume to the court detailing education, training experience, current telephone number and mailing address, and, when applicable, membership accreditations as described above. The local federal court will determine on a case-by-case basis whether the prospective interpreter is either "professionally qualified" or "language skilled."

There are currently no continuing education requirements for the Federal Court Interpreter Certification. The written portion of the examination serves as an eligibility requirement for candidates in Spanish. The passing score for the oral examination is 80% (compared to 70% for state certifications). The federal examination also differs from the state examination (described below) because the needs of the court are different at the state and federal levels.

Consortium for State Court Interpreter Certification

Because of the number of member states involved, the State Court Interpreter Certification program is not nearly as clear-cut as the Federal Certification. The information in this section relies on the National Center for State Courts (NCSC) website.⁶ The scope of this article does not allow for a description of the certification in each member state, and readers are advised to visit the NCSC website for detailed information for individual states and links to member state websites.

The Consortium was officially founded in July 1995, by Minnesota, New Jersey, Oregon, and Washington. The certification program is administered by the NCSC in Williamsburg, Virginia, on behalf of the state court systems in the U.S. It was created as a way to develop court interpreter proficiency tests, make them available to member states, and regulate the use of the tests. It is a mechanism through which funds from several sources can be combined under a single administrative umbrella to achieve economies of scale across jurisdictional and organizational boundaries. There are currently 29 member states.⁷

The certification requirements differ from state to state.⁸ However, the use of standardized testing instruments, administration, and test rating procedures makes it possible for Consortium members to establish certification reciprocity. This means that interpreters tested in other member states need not be retested in the home member state. The NCSC maintains a central database of interpreters who have been tested using Consortium tests. The Consortium recommends that applicants have the following qualifications before taking the test:

- A native-like mastery of *both* English and a second language;
- A wide general knowledge characteristic of what a minimum of two years of general education at a college or university would provide; and
- An ability to perform the three major types of court interpreting:
 - sight interpreting,
 - consecutive interpreting, and
 - simultaneous interpreting.

While the above entry qualifications are voluntary, most states require candidates to attend a preparatory workshop prior to taking the examination, to participate in a written examination, and to agree to some level of continuing education. Strict continuing education requirements are enforced in the state of California.⁹ The tests currently available include the following languages: Arabic, Cantonese, Haitian-Creole, Hmong, Korean, Laotian, Mandarin, Polish, Russian, Serbian, Somali, Spanish, and Vietnamese.

National Judiciary Interpreter and Translator Certification

Unlike the governmental credentials, the National Judiciary Inter-

preter and Translator Certification (NJITC) is a credential bestowed by NAJIT, a professional organization representing judiciary interpreters and translators throughout the U.S. The certification is currently available in Spanish only, and while the oral portion focuses on interpreter skills, the written portion of the exam also tests translation skills. The information on NAJIT certification presented below relies largely on the information available on the association's website (www.najit.org/exam-faqs.html).

The credential of Nationally Certified Judiciary Interpreter and Translator (NCJIT) is awarded to those individuals who pass a rigorous examination covering overall language skills and the common body of knowledge relevant to judiciary and related areas, and who have shown an understanding of and willingness to comply with a professional Code of Ethics and Professional Responsibilities (www.najit.org/ethics.html). The NJITC program was created at the request of NAJIT's membership in response to a survey conducted by its board of directors. It is designed to elevate professional standards, enhance individual performance, and offer a credential to those with the knowledge and skills required for the practice of the profession. Its purpose is to create a uniform standard for interpreters and translators working in a wide variety of legal settings, both civil and penal, throughout the U.S.

While there are currently no eligibility requirements, those who successfully pass the qualifying examination are required to accumulate 30 Continuing Education Units (CEUs) every three years. The three years commence on the date on which certification is obtained, or as of ➡

the date of the last recertification. The NJITC examination consists of a written and oral component. Candidates must pass the written examination before taking the oral one. Upon notification of a passing score on the written examination, candidates are notified that they are eligible to register for the oral component. Upon successfully completing both the written and oral examinations, a candidate earns the NJITC credential.

The questions in the written portion of the examination are at a level of difficulty equal to the Graduate Record Examination. Candidates are allowed to use their own dictionaries for the written translation section of the examination, which consists of two passages, one in English and one in Spanish. Written translation sources: medical/penal, legal (financial/civil).

The oral portion consists of the following components:

- Sight Translation
- Consecutive Interpretation
- Simultaneous Interpretation

For sight translation, which is currently tested in the English-to-Spanish and Spanish-to-English language combinations, formal language (high register) is required. One text containing approximately 250 words is used for each language direction, with a 10-minute limit. Sight translation sources: legal documents, insurance forms, letters, confessions, transcriptions, and arrest forms. For the consecutive interpretation component, with questions in the English and answers in Spanish, the testing time is 15-20 minutes for a single recording. Consecutive interpretation sources: civil, financial, medical, and criminal. Simultaneous interpretation is also tested in the English-to-Spanish and Spanish-to-English language combi-

nations, with one recording each and a testing time of eight minutes. Simultaneous interpretation sources: medical, legal, and financial.

The pass-fail cut score is determined using a criterion-referenced method. This is a method whereby candidates are evaluated against a predetermined standard. The passing score is based on an expected level of knowledge. Each candidate is measured against a standard of knowledge and not the performance of other individuals taking the examination. There is no limit on the number of candidates who may pass or fail the examination.

The credentialing efforts in the field of translation and interpretation in the U.S. are on the rise, which will undoubtedly benefit the T&I profession. The most dramatic changes are currently seen in our own credential, ATA accreditation, which will be the subject of our next article. As the editor of this series, I encourage readers to submit any relevant information concerning certification or similar programs, as well as comments on the information published in this series, to my e-mail address at jiri@cetra.com.

Notes

1. For exhaustive treatment of T&I programs in the U.S., see *Programs in Translation Studies: An ATA Handbook*, edited by Gertrud Champe, recently published by ATA. Another ATA publication, *Translating and Interpreting Programs in North America: A Survey*, compiled and edited by William Park, is scheduled for a new edition under a new name, *Park's Guide to Translating and Interpreting Programs in North America*.
2. Currently only the Spanish examination is administered.

3. This information is also available in Ted Crump's *Translating and Interpreting in the Federal Government*, published in 2001 by ATA. The Federal Program is described in the last chapter of the book, authored by Marijke van der Heide.
4. No less than 102 different languages were used in 2002, and 88 in 2001.
5. Marijke van der Heide reports that the Administrative Office is planning to change these definitions and categories in the near future.
6. www.ncsconline.org/D_Research/CourtInterp.html.
7. See www.ncsconline.org/wc/publications/Res_CtInte_ConsortCertFAQsPub.pdf. The member states are (with the date of joining in parentheses): Arkansas (1999); California (2000); Colorado (1998); Connecticut (2001); Delaware (1996); Florida (1997); Georgia (1999); Hawaii (1997); Idaho (1998); Illinois/Cook County (1998); Indiana (2002); Kentucky (2001); Maryland (1995); Massachusetts (2000); Michigan (1999); Minnesota (1995); Missouri (1999); Nebraska (1999); Nevada (2001); New Jersey (1995); New Mexico (1995); North Carolina (1999); Oregon (1995); Tennessee (2000); Texas (2001); Utah (1995); Virginia (1995); Washington (1995); and Wisconsin (1998).
8. Detailed information is available at www.ncsconline.org/wc/publications/Res_CtInte_ConsortCertRqmntsSurvey2001Pub.pdf.

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that issue arise in Q&A. If a questioner starts rambling and shows no sign of relinquishing the mike, break in (pleasantly) to say you have a particularly appropriate example to show him/her during the coffee break and move on.

10. **If you have organized the meeting yourself, consider producing proceedings (by taping speeches/Q&A and editing the transcript, for example).** Arrange to have this report—or your handout, slides, or summary—published in sponsors' newsletters or on their websites to cash in on the ripple effect.
11. **If nobody invites you, create your own event for the businesses/industries you serve.** Team up with translators in the same field and offer to organize a short session for buyers of the

documents you specialize in. This can be an attractive option in fields where buyers are particularly clueless or, better yet, face an outside constraint (looming legislation on bilingual healthcare delivery; criticism from ethnic groups; export drive ahead; new markets opening up).

Ask a key buyer/industry body to host the event (this will make it easier to attract speakers and participants; it may also get you well-appointed premises for free). In your promotional materials, speak your target audience's language. Focus, focus, focus. Make it clear that attendees will leave with at least three practical insights/solutions that they will be able to implement immediately. Bring in additional speakers with related subject-matter expertise to round out your offering (make sure they are good speakers). For your audience, look for quality not quantity:

five attendees can be enough to make a meeting work, provided they are the right people (key industry representatives, for example—see “ripple effect” above).

12. **Follow up: thank the organizers/hosts/partners in writing within the week, and ask if they have received any feedback.** You might even orchestrate a positive feedback campaign from translators or other language-aware people attending the meeting. In all subsequent public discussions of the event, lavish praise upon the hosts/sponsors for their foresight in identifying the need for this meeting and organizing it (yes, even if you and your team organized it). This will make them more willing to host a second event.

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9. The compliance requirements for California interpreters are available on the web at www.courtinfo.ca.gov/programs/courtinterpreters/documents/ce-req.pdf.

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in next month's
Chronicle...

**translators,
interpreters, and
computers**

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not available in the U.S. Afterwards, we meandered over to Underground Atlanta, where a wispy diviner told our fortunes with tarot cards. I am pleased to report that my business future looks bright.

After a year of hard work, fly off to sunny Arizona. Although CNN may not be there this year, who knows what other notable event may take place? Attend a few sessions and profit from your colleagues' expertise. Cut loose and escape the confines of the hotel to sample the local cuisine. Or do like me, and prepare a workshop. Find a buddy and share what you know. See you in Phoenix.

Notes

1. Wright, Edmund. *Chronological Dictionary of Quotations*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing Limited, 1994.
2. Translation and Terrorism: A Town Hall Meeting. 43rd Annual Conference of the American Translators Association. November 6-9, 2002. Hyatt Regency Hotel, Atlanta.
3. Bill Skinner (info@williamskinner.com), Betty Howell (betty@tbhinc.com).
4. World of Coca-Cola (www.woccatlanta.com).

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