

International Certification Study: ATA's Credential

By Jiri Stejskal

In the last issue, we reviewed the credentialing possibilities for translators and interpreters in the U.S. in general, and those offered by the Federal Court Interpreter Certification Program, the State Court Interpreter Certification Program, and the National Association of Judiciary Interpreters and Translators (NAJIT) in particular. This time, we will take a close look at our own credential for translators, currently known as ATA accreditation, which is undergoing significant changes. Some of the information below was presented at the XVI FIT World Congress in Vancouver, British Columbia, last year by the author of this series and was subsequently published in the *Congress Proceedings*.¹

This article could not have been completed without the generous assistance of those who have shaped ATA's credential into its current form, and who strive to improve it even further:

- **Lilian Novas Van Vranken**, chair, ATA Accreditation Committee (lilivv@houston.rr.com);
- **Celia Bohannon**, deputy chair, ATA Accreditation Committee (bohannon@sover.net);
- **Ann Macfarlane**, past ATA president and current executive director of NAJIT (info@russianresourcesint.com);
- **Marian Greenfield**, ATA director and chair of the Ad-Hoc Continuing Education Requirements Committee (msgreenfield@msgreenfieldtranslations.com); and
- **Terry Hanlen**, ATA accreditation program manager (terry@atanet.org).

Information on the current structure of ATA's accreditation program is available in great detail on the association's website (www.atanet.org), so we will focus on new developments here rather than on existing procedures.

Looking back, the first accreditation examination was available only for German-into-English candidates. The inaugural sittings were held simultaneously in New York City and Camden, New Jersey, September 22, 1973, for 31 candidates. In 2002, almost 1,000 candidates took the exam at nearly 50 exam sittings in 20

“...This series has given us a good idea of the practices that are being followed elsewhere within the T&I profession and, even more importantly, what practices seem to work best...”

states within the U.S. and in 7 other countries. Today, there are more than 2,000 accredited ATA members, many in more than one language pair. The credential is currently available in 24 language combinations², and the number is growing.³ The accreditation exam is challenging, with an overall pass rate below 20%. ATA accreditation exams take place during ATA's Annual Conference and are also scheduled by local groups and chapters, agencies, or translators in cooperation with ATA throughout the U.S. and in various countries.

Offering sittings abroad is a unique feature of the credential, which makes it possible for the growing number of non-U.S. ATA

members to be accredited. However, the fact that the accreditation exam can be taken in many countries has not been uncontroversial. In 1999, the ATA Board of Directors decided to suspend ATA accreditation sittings abroad in response to concerns expressed by some ATA members about unfair competition. A survey was conducted in order to quantify the opinions of the membership regarding a variety of important international accreditation issues. The ultimate purpose of the 2000 ATA International Accreditation Survey was to obtain results that could be readily used by ATA to consider the question of future accreditation offerings abroad. The results of the survey were rather interesting.

In February 2000, survey forms were sent to 7,433 members. 1,875 completed forms were received by the deadline (a 25% response rate). The study and subsequent report (prepared by Industry Insights, Inc.) focused on such key issues as:

- Respondent demographics, such as member type, ATA accreditation, and country of residence;
- Opinions regarding ATA's structure and priorities;
- Whether ATA accreditation examinations should be held only in the U.S. or worldwide;
- Predicted likelihood of various possible outcomes; and
- Degree of agreement or disagreement with various statements regarding international accreditation.

Roughly 4 out of 10 respondents were ATA accredited. Most respondents (82%) lived in the U.S. The majority of respondents (57%) felt that ATA should be a national organization with an international orientation. Over 60% of respondents thought ➡

ATA should treat all members equally in terms of protecting and defending interests. In terms of where accreditation exam sittings should be held, which was the key issue of the survey, the responses were divided evenly between “in the U.S. only” and “throughout the world.” As could be expected, members living outside the U.S. were more often in favor of holding exam sittings worldwide. The entire report is available online at www.atanet.org/bin/view.pl/17218.html.

Having studied the results of the survey and after reviewing the implications of the issue in terms of the association's bylaws, the ATA Board resolved in March 2000 that the suspension of international accreditation sittings that had been enacted in 1999 for the purpose of studying the issue should be lifted. The practice of offering international accreditation exam sittings has continued ever since. At the same meeting, the Board also decided to commission Michael Hamm & Associates to review the accreditation process, with then-president Ann Macfarlane leading the effort.

Michael Hamm, former executive director of the National Organization for Competency Assurance and the principal of Michael Hamm & Associates, reviewed and evaluated ATA's accreditation program and provided the association's leadership and members at large with a number of valuable insights. The purpose of what came to be known as the “Hamm Report” was to point the way toward strengthening the program and improving the benefits of accreditation. In the report, the following strengths were identified:

- The association is using an actual performance assessment rather than a knowledge-based multiple-choice examination.

- The association has invested many hours and extensive fiscal and human resources in standardizing the error-marking framework, establishing comparable grading standards within and across language pairs, and training language chairs and graders.
- The association has developed careful procedures for grading, crosschecking by a third grader, and review.
- The association has established clear expectations and guidelines for applicants.
- ATA translation examinations are considered to be quite rigorous.
- Accreditation Committee members and staff are quite committed to improving the accreditation process. ATA's Board of Directors is also very supportive of improving this program.
- Applicants stated that the accreditation process has become more objective and reliable than it used to be.

The report then pointed out several areas in which the accreditation program could be improved:

- Changing the name of the process to “certification.”
- Creating an independent or semi-independent governing body for the program.
- Offering certification to nonmembers of ATA.
- Establishing eligibility requirements.
- Establishing continuing education requirements.
- Developing more extensive criteria for selecting, training, and evaluating graders and language chairs.

As its name suggests, the accreditation program offers “accreditation.” This term was chosen for the program at its inception in 1971, but it is

not the most accurate way to describe qualifying an individual person. In the U.S., the term “accreditation” is used for a conformity assessment process for systems, organizations, or institutions. Certification, on the other hand, is a process by which an organization grants recognition of a certain level of competence to an individual who has met predetermined qualifications. For an organization whose main focus is on language and linguistic competence, ATA's Board judged it important to use the customary term for the process of certification in order to avoid confusion about the credential. The name change involves an amendment to the association's bylaws, to be voted on in November 2003. The author of this series sincerely hopes ATA's membership will support this initiative, since it will be a welcome change that will make the program more transparent to translation users and providers alike.

An independent certification body is something to be considered in the future and is closely related to the next point, namely offering certification to nonmembers. Michael Hamm observes that while most credentialing efforts are initially developed to meet the needs of the members, the most effective ones are not tied to any membership criteria for participation, since competence and quality have nothing to do with the payment of dues to an association. The credibility of the credentialing effort is enhanced if it is viewed as a service to the wider public rather than a service to members. The move from a membership-based to a freestanding credential is a significant one in the evolution of any voluntary certification program. In the case of ATA, the quality of the standard is already equivalent to that of many freestanding certifications. Opening the

examination to nonmembers, and eventually establishing an independent certification body, are of the utmost importance if ATA's credential is to become one which is widely recognized beyond the membership. However, offering the exam to nonmembers would be the last step undertaken in the development of the credential, and much has to be achieved before we even begin contemplating it.

It is customary for certification programs both in the U.S. and abroad to establish minimum eligibility requirements in order to apply for the credential. Erik Hertog of the Department of Translation and Interpreting at the Lessius Hogeschool in Belgium observes: "In most countries, the call for admission into the profession [of translator and/or interpreter] is for a university level degree and/or a minimum amount of practical experience."⁴ It is also customary to institute continuing education requirements in order to keep the credential current. According to Michael Hamm, "Most reputable certification and accreditation programs require holders of the credential to demonstrate ongoing compliance with certain criteria and standards."⁵ Both eligibility and continuing education requirements help to strengthen the credential. Eligibility requirements, in addition to providing evidence of relevant experience, help to streamline the certification process by eliminating candidates whose skills fall short of the expected level of competence. The continuing education requirement adds credibility to the credential by making sure that certificants are engaged in relevant professional activities even after an extended period of time has elapsed since the certification.

Eligibility requirements and continuing education requirements have

been likened to the two missing legs of a tripod that would support the credential, together with the test itself (the single leg currently supporting it).⁶ To provide a strong and balanced base for ATA's credential, the Board established two ad-hoc committees in the spring of 2002 which would, in cooperation with the Accreditation Committee, draft a set of standards. Our International Certification Study series played a significant role in establishing these standards. The articles in this series have given us a good idea of the practices that are being followed elsewhere within the T&I profession and, even more importantly, what practices seem to work best. In addition, both committees examined various certification programs administered by U.S. nonprofit organizations in professions unrelated to T&I, but similar to ATA in their scope and organizational structure.

Based on the research of the two committees⁷ and much discussion involving the entire ATA Board and the Accreditation Committee, the Board approved specific eligibility requirements and continuing education requirements at its meeting in Alexandria, Virginia, March 7-9, 2003. The full text of the two resolutions was published in the April 2003 issue of the *ATA Chronicle* in Tom West's column "From the President." The new requirements will become effective on January 1, 2004. The eligibility requirements will apply to new candidates only, whereas the continuing education requirements will apply to both new candidates and members who currently hold accreditation. A summary of the new requirements follows:

To be eligible for the accreditation (certification) test, candidates will have to: a) demonstrate past

experience as translators and/or post-secondary education, and b) sign a statement that they have read and understand ATA's Code of Professional Conduct and Business Practices, and that they pledge to abide by it. To fulfill the requirements for continuing education, within the first three-year period after accreditation (certification) holders will need to complete an ethics workshop or course. During that same three-year period, and over successive three-year periods, they will need to complete at least 20 hours of continuing education credits through coursework, seminars, conferences, and other activities as evidence of involvement in translation and/or interpreting.

Finally, ATA has been working on developing more extensive criteria for selecting, training, and evaluating graders and language chairs. Evaluation of linguistic skills is necessarily subjective, and can be dependent on the individuals performing the evaluation. Thus, it is important to establish a process for selecting and evaluating graders. As for training, attaining a general consensus regarding what standard of competence to adopt, particularly when that standard will be applied to individuals trained in many different cultural backgrounds, is not an easy task. ATA has been working for a number of years to develop training seminars and other tools to create and uphold uniform standards across multiple languages, and among graders within a single language. The Accreditation Committee has conducted several regional grader-training workshops, in addition to the workshops held during ATA's Annual Conference, and continues to ➡

develop new programs to train and upgrade the skills of graders. This is a unique effort in the assessment area, and ATA has invested significant resources in pursuing it.

A new grading system has been in place since last year's ATA Annual Conference in Atlanta. The new system is a point-based marking system in which the grader assigns 1, 2, 4, 8, or 16 points for each error. This scale reflects experienced graders' judgments about the relationships among different types of errors, and about what sorts of errors might be allowed in a translation that meets ATA standards. Criteria include whether a target-language reader would certainly recognize the error, and how serious the consequences would be in the context of the passage. One of the main advantages of the new point system is that the grading now reflects five different levels of seriousness for each error, rather than the former system with two levels.⁸

ATA's accreditation examination consists of three passages of approximately 225–275 words each. The passages present common translation challenges that may vary from one language combination to another. The level of difficulty is comparable to the level that professional translators would expect to see in their daily work. One passage is mandatory for all candidates. This general text is written for the educated lay reader in expository or journalistic style. Each candidate must also choose between two elective passages, one from the domain of science/technology/medicine and one from the domain of law/business/finance. These passages have the characteristics of typical texts within these domains, but should not contain specialized terminology or require mastery of a particular field. An examination receives a grade of Pass if the translation of the

general passage and one elective passage meets the standards established by the accreditation program.⁹

This is the last article in this series describing credentialing procedures in a specific geographical area. In the next issue, we will conclude the series with a summary of the information published here over the last two years, including an analysis of various modes of credentialing in the T&I field. 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. Stejskal, Jiri. "International Certification: The ATA Perspective." *Translation: New Ideas for a New Century*. FIT (2002): 349-53. Copies of the article can be requested at jiri@cetra.com.
2. English (U.S.) is always one of the languages in the combination. For English as the target language, tests are available for Arabic, Danish, Dutch, French, German, Hungarian, Italian, Japanese, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish. For English as the source language, tests are available for Chinese, Dutch, Finnish, French, German, Hungarian, Italian, Japanese, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish. Currently, there is no Chinese-into-English or Finnish-into-English test, and no English-into-Arabic or English-into-Danish test.
3. An effort is underway to establish ATA accreditation in one or more language pairs involving Bosnian, Croatian, and/or Serbian. For more information, contact the Volunteer Committee at dbaplanb@aol.com.
4. Hertog, Erik, ed. *Aequitas: Access to Justice Across Language and Culture in the EU*. The 116-page report is available online at www.legalintrans.info/Aequitas.pdf or in print from erik.hertog@lessius-ho.be.
5. Hamm, Michael. "Certification and Accreditation Programs." *Professional Practices in Association Management*. Washington, DC: ASAE, 1997. 335-43.
6. Celia Bohannon, ATA Accreditation Committee deputy chair, is the author of the "tripod" metaphor. She illustrated her point very persuasively with an actual tripod at several meetings of both the Accreditation Committee and ATA Board.
7. The members of the Eligibility Requirements Committee are: Jiri Stejskal (chair); Beatriz Bonnet; Jean Leblon; and Rosalie Wells. The members of the Continuing Education Requirements Committee are: Marian Greenfield (chair); Virginia Benmaman; and Georgeanne Weller.
8. Bohannon, Celia. "Accreditation Forum." *ATA Chronicle*. August 2002: 57. See also the "Accreditation Forum" column in the October 2002 issue for grading guidelines.
9. Ibid.

ata

For detailed information on ATA's accreditation process, please visit ATA online at www.atanet.org