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Emotional labour and affective skills in public service interpreting: expanding the competence models / Trabajo emocional y aptitudes afectivas en la interpretación en servicios públicos: expandiendo los modelos de competencia

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Abstract: Extant approaches to interpreter competence appear to be directed at performance measurement, mainly in relation to cognitive skills. These approaches are reinforced by notions of professionalism underpinned by prescriptive ethical standards. Overall, the model largely neglects emotions as irrelevant and even contrary to good interpreting. This article discusses emotions in the context of public service or community interpreting and how the interpreters' emotional labour and, in particular, emotion regulation to meet the requirements of the role, influences service provision and interpreter wellbeing. Data from 14 interviews with interpreters suggest six contextual factors increasing such emotional labour, namely lack of dedicated training, assumptions about clients, ethical dilemmas, unclear role boundaries, client trauma, and identification with the clients. These raw or untrained emotional responses can lead to interpreter interventions outside the traditional scope of the role and psycho-emotional distress among practitioners. A holistic approach to interpreter competence including affective skills is suggested, alongside a model for teaching emotion regulation to interpreters.

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Resumen: Los criterios de competencia actuales para intérpretes parecen estar dirigidos a medir el rendimiento, principalmente con respecto a aptitudes cognitivas. Estos criterios se consolidan mediante nociones de profesionalismo fundadas en estándares de ética normativa. En líneas generales, este modelo omite las emociones como irrelevantes e incluso contrarias a una buena interpretación.

El presente artículo trata las emociones en el contexto de la interpretación comunitaria o en servicios públicos y cómo el trabajo emocional de quienes interpretan y, en particular, el control de emociones para cumplir con los requisitos del trabajo, afecta el servicio de interpretación y el bienestar de quienes lo brindan. Los datos de las entrevistas realizadas a 14 intérpretes sugieren seis factores contextuales que aumentan este trabajo emocional, a saber, la falta de formación específica, las suposiciones sobre los clientes, los dilemas éticos, los límites poco claros de las funciones, el trauma del cliente y la identificación con los clientes. Estas respuestas emotivas brutas o sin formación pueden conducir a intervenciones de intérpretes más allá del rol tradicional, así como aflicciones psico-emocionales para quienes interpretan. Se sugieren un enfoque holístico de competencia para intérpretes que incluya aptitudes afectivas y un modelo para enseñar a intérpretes a regular emociones.

Keywords: Public service interpreting, interpreter competency, affect, emotional labour, interpreter training

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1. Introduction

Disciplines like psychology and social work have acknowledged and researched how affect (i.e., feelings and emotions (Niven, 2013)) can impact working conditions and performance (e.g., Lee & Chelladurai, 2016; Sewell, 2020). Conversely, the interpreters' affect has seldom been included in theoretical or practical models of interpreter competence, which have often focused on aspects of performance, such as linguistic, cultural, and transfer skills. In turn, these models have shaped interpreter training curricula (Kalina, 2000; Albl-Mikasa, 2012) and accreditation (e.g., NAATI, n.d.).

Despite the limited weight of affect in Translation and Interpreting (T&I) pedagogy, scholars like Costa et al. (2020) and Roberts (2015) have discussed emotions in relation to interpreter-mediated communication. Affect underpins many of the conversations interpreted in public service or community settings, like health diagnoses, court depositions, asylum claim interviews, or mental health consultations, among many others. Interpreters must navigate the clients' as well as their own emotions while ensuring effective performance. This type of emotional labour is commonly referred to as emotion regulation (Lee & Chelladurai, 2016). Recent studies have also discussed psycho-emotional distress among interpreters as a result of such emotion work (Bontempo & Malcolm, 2012; Lai et al., 2015). Given that most recommendations resulting from such research centre around debriefing and self-care, it remains relevant to argue the need to develop emotional skills, such as emotional intelligence (Schutte et al., 2013) or cognitive empathy (Yaseen & Foster, 2019).

This article presents findings from qualitative analysis of interviews with 14 public service interpreters working across settings and language combinations. The analysis suggests that interpreters often engage in emotional labour, with six contextual factors increasing this effort: ethical dilemmas, identification with clients, client trauma, conflicting expectations from other parties, assumptions by the interpreters, and lack of affective training. The study

also found evidence of an impact on service provision and interpreters on a personal level as a result of such emotional labour. Consequently, the article aims to highlight the need to recognise affect as a significant aspect of interpreter work in community settings and advance a holistic model of interpreter competence and training.

2. Literature review

2.1. *An incomplete model of interpreter competence*

Defining competence has been a challenging task for scholars and educators across disciplines. Mulder et al. (2009) offer a succinct overview of various definitions, including what they call the “new” concept of competence as

a series of integrated capabilities consisting of clusters of knowledge, skills and attitudes necessarily conditional for task performance and problem solving and for being able to function effectively in a certain profession, organisation, job, role and situation (p. 757).

Interpreting is a complex task involving various types of knowledge and skills greatly exceeding an obvious command of the interpreter’s working languages. Competence models for interpreting in general have often borrowed from those for translation (Kaczmarek, 2010) and appear to focus on linguistic and technical competencies (D’Hayer, 2006; Pena Diaz, 2016). Unlike conference or simultaneous interpreting, where message transfer largely takes precedence over interpersonal skills and empathy (Albl-Mikasa, 2012), Public Service Interpreting and Translation (PSIT) models often include culture and interpersonal skills to account for the nature of dialogue interpreting in social contexts (Abril Marti, 2006; Hrehovčik, 2009). Yet, these seemingly broader models have also been criticised as failing to reflect the complexity of interpreter work in community settings (Kaczmarek, 2010).

One aspect that continues to be missing from interpreter competence frameworks is the role of affect and emotions in interpreter-mediated communication. Despite notable observations such as D’Hayer’s (2006) remark about “soft” skills or Bancroft’s (2017) comments on interpreter empathy, affect remains largely ignored in interpreter training. Albl Mikasa (2012) concedes that empathy “is what lends credibility to the interpreter’s performance, which would otherwise remain flat and somehow incomplete even when all other skills (language, interpreting techniques, terminology) are fully operating” (p. 72). She goes on to discuss resilience and tolerance to frustration as desired attitudes, albeit in relation to simultaneous interpreting.

Klieme et al. (2008) argue that “building competencies has been identified as the main objective of education” (p. 3). Unsurprisingly, then, overviews of PSIT training programmes such as those by Abril Marti (2006) or Mikkelson (2014) evidence an emphasis on linguistic and technical skills as the core of interpreter competence. Professional bodies solidify this restriction in their own operationalisations. For instance, the European Network for Public Service Interpreting and Translation (ENPSIT, n.d.)’s knowledge, skills, and attitudes model and Australia’s National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (NAATI)’s competencies framework portray an interpreter unfazed by the emotions and stress of the job.

Further strengthening said disregard for emotional skills in interpreter training and competence models is the prevalence of codes of ethics as a unifying trait of professional interpreters (Hale, 2007; Wadensjö, 1998). While a detailed discussion of codes and principles falls outside the scope of this paper (for an in-depth review see Phelan et al., 2019), the

tenets of accuracy, impartiality, and role boundaries characterising professionalism can lead to an illusion of affectless individuals.

Contrary to this perceived invisibility of emotions, Ayan (2020) draws on Hochschild's (1983) seminal work on emotional labour – i.e., how individuals regulate feelings and express emotions as required for their role (Lee & Chelladurai, 2016; Grandey & Gabriel, 2015) – to reframe interpreter neutrality. This refreshing approach could pave a new way to consider interpreter competence and ethics from a holistic perspective and acknowledge the weight of affect in PSIT.

2.2. Interpreting and affect

Only a few studies have analysed the interpreter's emotional skills and their impact on the encounter. Bontempo & Napier's (2014) work suggests that emotional stability and personality traits play a role in interpreter performance. Along similar lines, Cai et al. (2023) found an interrelation between psychological factors and interpreter performance whereby anxiety, for instance, can be mitigated by training and awareness.

Public service interpreters work across agencies enabling communication between culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) clients and service providers. The independent nature of the role means that practitioners can mediate police interviews, midwife appointments, mental health consultations, parent-teacher meetings, and asylum claims, just to name a few. Emotions can be prevalent in some cases, such as when interpreting for trauma survivors, palliative care patients, or children.

The literature shows that interpreters are not immune to emotions arising during assignments (Bontempo & Malcom, 2012; Darroch & Dempsey, 2016). PSIT studies point to an empathic engagement between interpreters and clients through the emotional narratives that they interpret (Roberts, 2015).

Empathy involves reacting to someone else's emotions by experiencing similar affect (Yaseen & Foster, 2019). The reaction can increase when interpreting for vulnerable clients like refugees (Bancroft, 2017; González Campanella, 2022a; Todorova, 2021). In turn, this engagement can lead to various psycho-affective repercussions like burnout and secondary or vicarious traumatisation (Splevins et al., 2010; Valero-Garcés, 2015). Such findings have elicited calls for more emphasis on self-care and appropriate debriefing practices (Berthold & Fischman, 2014; Costa et al., 2020; Korpala and Mellinger, 2022).

While self-care and supervision are undoubtedly critical, on their own they fail to address the need to expand current interpreting curricula to include aspects of emotional labour such as emotion regulation. All in all, the insights from previous research indicate that "incorporating trait awareness into interpreter training, and developing aspects such as self-confidence, positive coping skills, assertiveness and resilience would most certainly be useful, given the broader evidence pointing to these aspects of personality as relevant for effective occupational performance" (Bontempo & Napier, 2014, p. 102).

2.3. Emotional labour and emotional intelligence

Affect as a relevant professional trait has been historically restricted to disciplines like psychology (e.g., O'Brien et al., 2008). Guy et al. (2008) and Mastracci et al. (2010) have extended this knowledge to new fields like public services, claiming that affect and emotional labour are intrinsic to interpersonal relations and therefore equally relevant across multiple disciplines.

Grandey & Gabriel (2015) offer a holistic model of emotional labour as an integrated function of three components: emotional requirements, emotion regulation, and emotion performance. While the emotional requirements relate to demands of the job, emotion regulation refers to the conscious or unconscious work that individuals do to meet those demands. The result of such regulation is what the authors call emotion performance or deviance, depending on whether individuals feel like they succeed in meeting the emotional requirements of their job.

A series of antecedents relating to the innate personality traits of the individual also condition the degree of emotion regulation involved. The outcome of that labour – performance and wellbeing experienced by the individual through their work – can be impacted by several relational and contextual factors or moderators (Grandey & Gabriel, 2015; Lee & Chelladurai, 2016). Given the relevance of emotional labour for a more nuanced operationalisation of interpreter competence, the Grandey & Gabriel model was used as theoretical framework to conceptualise PSIT as shown in Figure 1 below:

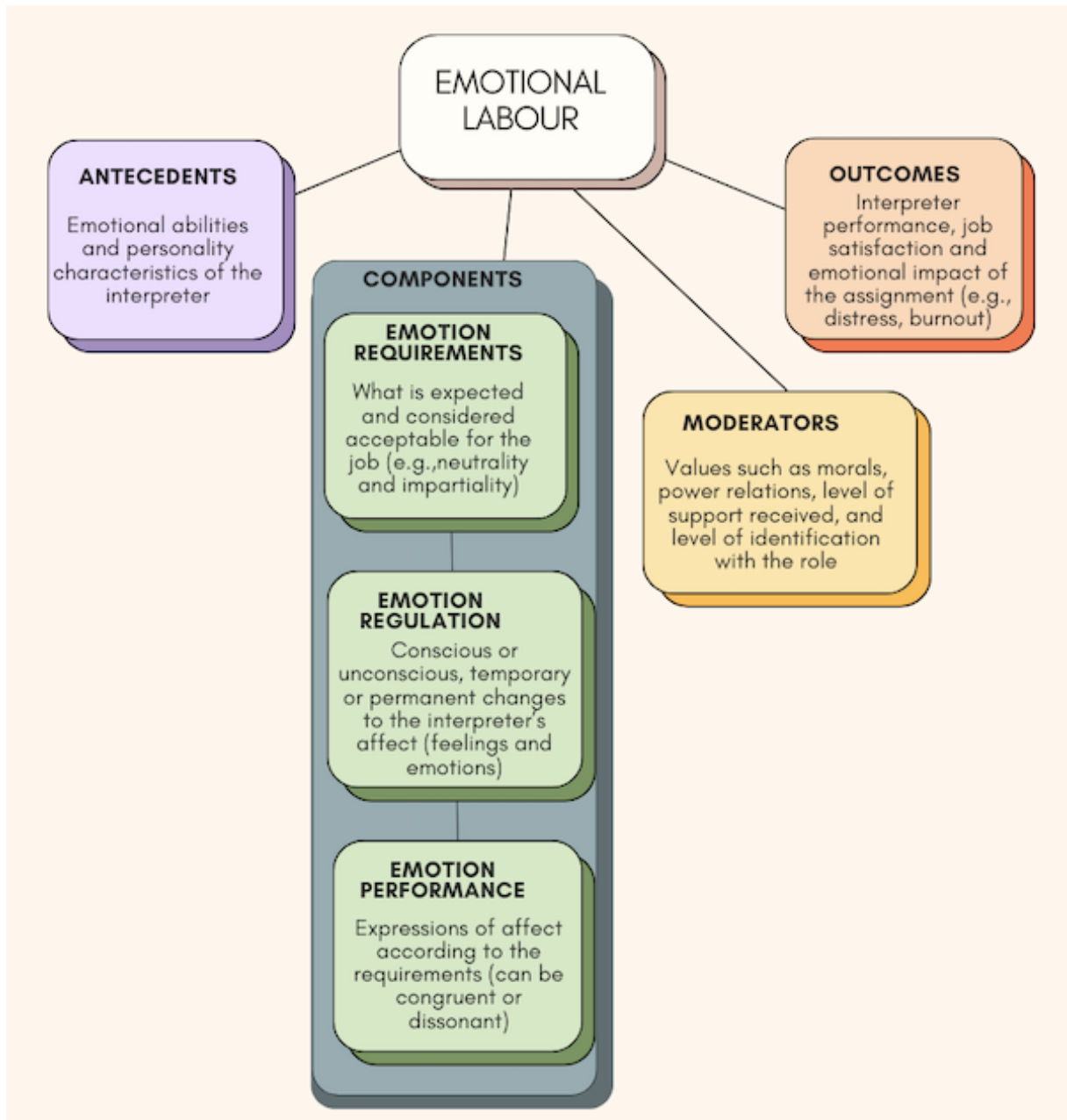


Figure 1. Holistic model of emotional labour in PSIT, adapted from Grandey and Gabriel (2015, p. 325).

Research suggests that work stressors like role ambiguity can have a negative impact on performance, physical, and mental wellbeing (O'Brien et al., 2008). Lee and Chelladurai's (2016) work underscores the relevance of developing ways to engage in deep emotion regulation, i.e., not just temporarily to meet the demands of a specific task, to avoid emotional exhaustion and burnout. Interdisciplinary research has also shown a positive impact of developing specific emotion regulation skills on psychosocial aspects like mental health and task performance (Schutte et al., 2013), as well as overall wellbeing and emotional stability (Kotsou et al., 2011; Nelis et al., 2011).

The most common terminology used to refer to such skills includes emotional intelligence (Grant et al., 2014) and emotional literacy (Steiner, 1997). While there is a body of literature discussing the differences between both terms, the use of one or the other sometimes relates to geographical or contextual preferences (for a detailed review of these terms and their use see Alemdar & Anilan, 2020). Emotional intelligence involves a series of competencies including the ability to perceive, comprehend, manage, and use emotions within the individual, as well as in interaction with others (Lee & Chelladurai, 2016; Schutte et al., 2013). Mastracci et al. (2010) argue that it is the equivalent of physical fitness for any athletic exercise, in that it provides the individual with the resources to meet the demands placed by emotional labour.

One example of a valuable affective skill for regulating emotions is understanding the distinction between cognitive empathy, i.e., an intellectual engagement with the emotional content for translation and thus a form of emotion regulation, and emotional empathy, i.e., where emotions can overwhelm the person (Yaseen & Foster, 2019). The benefits of developing emotional intelligence are twofold, as they relate to the person and their performance. Controlling or regulating emotions can also help to respond to ethical dilemmas, since “with the ability to control emotions, ethical concerns can be signalled and moral activities can be motivated” (Sewell, 2020, p. 8). Given the increasing amount of research on the conflict between codes of ethics and professional practice for interpreters (Dean & Pollard, 2011, 2018; Martín Ruano, 2017; Munyageyo, 2016) and the specific challenges posed by work with vulnerable or traumatised clients (Bancroft et al., 2016; González Campanella, 2022a; Jiménez Ivars, 2020), emotion regulation and emotional intelligence appear paramount.

Several scholarly proposals aimed to develop emotional intelligence and emotion regulation could inform a new PSIT curriculum. For example, Schutte et al.’s (2013) and Sewell’s (2020) proposals for teaching emotion regulation to social work students involve acquiring knowledge about emotions and emotion regulation. Their recommendations also draw attention to more holistic aspects targeted at developing wellbeing like reflection and mindfulness. Their pedagogy combines various teaching methods to achieve this, including analysis of case studies and role-play for experiential learning from real life scenarios and safe peer feedback (Sewell, 2020). Within translation and interpreting, Bruno and Iborra Cuéllar (2021) have provided empirical evidence of the benefits of affective training. While their study opens new possibilities for exploring interpreting competence holistically, there is limited knowledge about the theoretical underpinnings of such training and how it was developed.

3. The study

This article presents empirical data from qualitative research exploring interpreting in refugee contexts, approved by the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee (González Campanella, 2022b). While the broader case study included the three parties involved in the interpreter-mediated communication event (i.e., interpreters, refugee-background clients, and stakeholders), only findings from the interpreter participants relating to affect in their work with refugee and non-refugee clients¹ are discussed below.

Data was collected through episodic, semi-structured interviews combining experiential narrative and specific answers (Flick, 2018). The interviews were conducted in Spanish or English, depending on the interpreters’ preference. An interview protocol was used to guide data collection, which was enhanced by follow-up questions based on each participant’s

¹ Most interpreters were often unaware of the legal status of their CALD clients as migrants or refugees.

experiences and interests. Data analysis followed the coding principles of constructivist ground theory, with iterative coding to find overarching themes (Charmaz, 2014). The figures below illustrate the variety of languages and training reflected by the 14 participants in the study. For more details about the data collection and analysis methods used see González Campanella (2022b). Due to the small pool of potential participants, demographic information is not reported, in order to preserve anonymity.

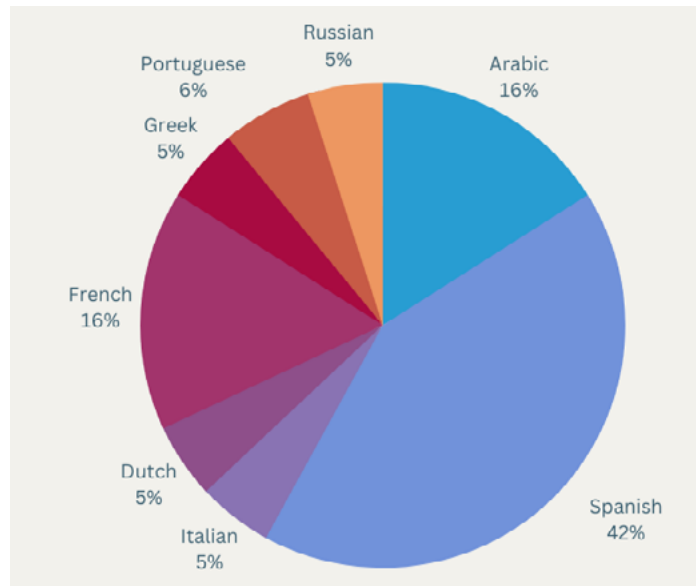


Figure 2. Participants' working languages.²

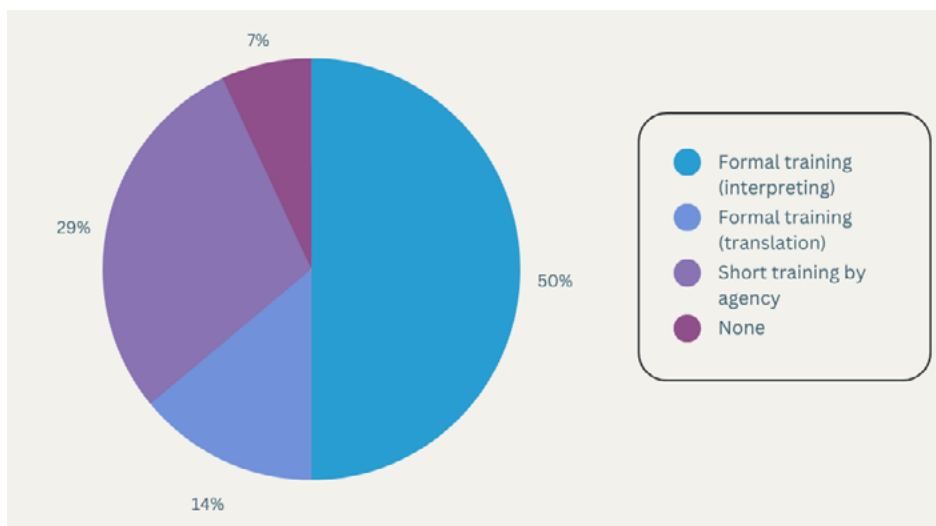


Figure 3. Participants' training background.

² The total number of languages exceeds the number of participants due to some interpreters working in multiple languages.

One of the aspects explored in this research was emotions in interpreting for vulnerable clients – mainly in the form of empathy – and the psycho-affective impact of such work. The complexity of providing language support to people from refugee backgrounds and other vulnerable clients has been reported elsewhere (González Campanella, 2022a). The following discussion centres around the interpreters' self-reports concerning their work with vulnerable clients. The analysis of participant disclosures suggests factors which enhance the interpreters' emotional response and could be said to increase their emotional labour. Also presented below are data illustrating the impact of such emotional labour on the interpreters' performance.

4. Findings

The interpreters' affect when working with vulnerable clients was largely embodied in feelings of empathy. It underpinned the emotion regulation performed by the interpreters in order to meet the demands of their role. However, the interpreters' reports alluded to various contextual factors which seemed to increase their emotional response and the resulting emotional labour. These factors were: client trauma, conflicting role expectations, ethical dilemmas, assumptions, lack of training, and identification with the client. Each of these is presented below (in no particular order) and illustrated through verbatim quotes from participants.³

4.1 Contextual factors enhancing emotional responses

Client trauma

Interpreting for vulnerable clients who are likely to have experienced trauma was perceived by the majority of the interpreters (11/14) to increase their emotional response compared to other clients. Several participants shared stories about difficult assignments where witnessing client trauma created an added layer of emotions requiring regulation – or rather, suppression – to finish the job.

Int2: I wanted [the interpretation] to stop because [the CALD client] was in immense distress and I can't translate stammering, I don't know what that is.

The same participant shared how engaging with traumatic content can also impact translators who deal with written accounts of trauma. This participant experienced distress while carrying out translations of the client's story for an asylum hearing. Their experience underscores the relevance of addressing emotional labour and contextual factors in translation, as well as interpreting.

Int2: (...) trying to find equivalent metaphors in English to describe damage inflicted on a human body was actually... I had to be creative in a way that I did not want to be creative. (...) I'm not going to go into details because it was really disgusting, but he was strung up in a particular way and I couldn't quite figure out how, what he was saying. So, I ended up having to put my body in the same position so that I could understand well enough to be able to put that into English. And so, that experience of... uhm, I felt like I had sort of accompanied him to some degree through his trauma. And then that was also associated

³ Extracts from interviews originally carried out in Spanish have been translated by the author, a professional translator and interpreter for the language combination.

with my own feelings of guilt because I thought 'how could I possibly be feeling upset? I didn't have to go through this.'

Identification

Connected to the empathic response elicited by client trauma was the degree of identification that interpreters sometimes feel with their clients. The interpreters can identify with their clients because they share a similar background (e.g., forced migration), or through other aspects like age, gender, belonging to the same community, or even professional connection. Such points of connection with clients led to stronger emotional responses in the interpreters, requiring more intense emotional labour. The following quote illustrates different links between the interpreters and their CALD clients.

Int14: The other really difficult situation that stands out (...) is being with a refugee (...) through [post-traumatic stress disorder] sessions with a therapist. And that was hard because it triggered some of my own personal experiences; because I'm not a refugee myself but I come from a similar background (...) So, things that [the client] was talking about with the therapist were really similar to the things that I went through.

Code of ethics

One of the most prevalent factors across participants was the challenge created by the need to regulate emotional responses to align with ethical standards. The rigidity and lack of context in such tenets often led to dilemmas for the interpreters, who felt their emotions contravened professionalism. While ten out of the 14 interpreters mentioned the code of ethics as the most salient feature of professional interpreting, half of the participants interviewed in the study also commented on the emotional labour resulting from attempting to abide by them. The interpreters who experience empathic reactions during assignments feel their emotions are not valid or inappropriate under a model of neutrality and impartiality above all else.

Int3: The thing is that, when you train to become an interpreter, you're taught to follow the code of ethics. So, then there are so many things we cannot do or situations that we don't know how to navigate, because we always have to... it's as if we're being unethical, like we're not doing what's expected of us.

Int8: (...) you're told that 'you're a machine, you're a machine, you're a machine.' And yes, we are machines, but the message always goes through here [points to the heart] and some things you can't say... you have to be neutral but of course it creates something there, like how can I say you have cancer and you are going to die? I don't know... So, I think interpreters shouldn't be seen as machines (...) because we're also humans.

Conflicting role expectations

Another factor discussed by most interpreters in the study (12/14) was the difficulty of managing conflicting role expectations. While interactions with CALD clients posed some challenges, most of the issues mentioned by the interpreters resulted from demands placed by service providers. Their limited understanding of how to work with interpreters led to inappropriate requests and situations that put additional pressure on the interpreters and increased their emotional labour.

Int6: ...And [the service providers] told me, “please, don’t leave this person’s side by any means.” So, it was like I wasn’t even able to use the bathroom during that time because I was afraid that the person might leave (...) And at one point [the CALD client] began to cry... and [the provider] told me, “please, say something to this person, I don’t know what to do to calm her down.”

Int9: ... and [the service provider] left me in a locked room with the asylum seeker, the asylum seeker was handcuffed behind bars, and we were basically looking at each other in a distance of maybe, I don’t know, 30-40 centimetres, but we had like a glass that was separating us physically. (...) And I felt completely exposed as a professional, because I was not supposed to be chit-chatting, as I said, but at the same time the person in front of me was handcuffed.

Assumptions

The data also suggested that interpreters can be moved by a stronger empathic engagement with clients based on assumptions about them. These assumptions were apparent in three participants whose accounts of assignments showed underlying notions about the client’s background and culture. Having these positive or negative ideas about clients increased the interpreters’ emotional response and desire to help, which in turn conditioned their performance.

Int6: (...) generally, Latin Americans who come here have received some education, I mean, they don’t have an emotional need. They can express what they need. And they know that they’re in a different country and realise the different ways that people behave and express things differently, right? (...) But refugees carry with them a lot of anxiety...

Int13: (...) you can be compassionate and friendly and caring and go the extra mile for these people, you know? Because often it’s really hard for them, they’re in difficult situations...

Lack of training and preparation

The absence of dedicated training to work with vulnerable clients or any form of targeted affective training was shared by all participants in the study. Moreover, the heterogeneous training backgrounds among the interpreters meant that some practitioners had very limited skills to navigate the complexity of working in emotionally charged settings.

Int2: (...) [the service providers] could’ve given me information about how to protect myself from some of the risks of dealing with human rights abuses. So, if I’d been, I don’t know, if I’d had a short course on how to distinguish between compassion and empathy – you know, this is a rather key point – that might’ve helped me.

Int8: Working in court for eight hours, being in a surgery at the hospital, I mean, witnessing the surgery as it happens and seeing the person’s heart and explaining, it’s... I love it, I love it, but I also feel that no one tells you about that, no one explains. It’s only when you’re working that you start to come across like all the challenges you have to face, and that’s hard.

4.2. Impact on interpreter performance

In addition to contextual factors increasing the emotion requirements and the degree of emotion regulation for interpreters, another finding of the study was the impact of these emotional responses on the assignment. This section presents an overview of ways in which the interpreters' empathy and emotional engagement during assignments can manifest themselves and influence their performance. The impact can be considered in terms of the service provision (i.e., the interpreting itself) and the interpreters on a personal level.

Service provision

In most cases (8/14), the interpreters' affect – combined with or enhanced by the lack of training, assumptions about clients, and other contextual factors – led to different degrees of intervention in the mediated encounter. These emotionally charged interventions challenged more traditional notions of professional interpreting, e.g., as presented in codes of ethics. The interpreters in the study were found to add or unpack information as deemed necessary to ensure that clients were able to understand the message, give advice about other services available, and offer emotional support to clients in distress.

Int3: We're talking about a situation of post-surgery pain and questions like "did you ever – like – think, feel that you would never get better?" Like, "have you had suicidal thoughts? Have you had...?" Like that type of questions, to monitor the mental health of someone who suffers from chronic pain. So, in that situation, suffering pain is a very delicate situation and there's a lot of vulnerability as well. So, I think that, overall, it's really important that the person feels supported and cared for [by the interpreter], so to speak.

Int8: (...) Because [the medical staff] know the terms, like the jargon, and I know them, but the clients are like [as the CALD client] "I don't understand anything." [Interpreter acting out interpreting assignment] "The aorta vein, I'll explain now. So, this vein has a nerve going through here and here (...) Do you know what this vein is?" [As client] "No." So, I go, "ok, the aorta vein is the one pumping the blood..."

Int13: (...) [the CALD clients] have been to the doctor, and then they go and pick something up, and they will ask about the medicine and – at the pharmacy – and so, the pharmacist explains, but, you know, they will, often [the clients] only hear what they're ready to hear from the doctor and then it needs to be repeated. So, it's much more than just saying words, you know? It requires empathy, it requires being available, emotionally available, willing to go the extra mile (...)

Personal life and wellbeing

Most participants in the study (11/14) reflected on the emotional challenges of working with vulnerable clients and the different degrees to which they felt personally affected by it. While long-term distress was not apparent from the data, the interpreters' experiences spoke about how the contextual factors outlined above compounded their natural empathic response and resulted in a range of psycho-affective repercussions, from short-term distress and bursts of crying to intrusive thoughts. The data also suggested that the interpreters lacked the resources to engage in such emotional labour effectively (e.g., knowledge about different emotions, appropriate techniques to regulate affect, and ongoing self-care practices). Professional supervision and debriefing opportunities were also scarce or non-existent.

Int2: Well, I didn't cope very well, to be honest. I ended up having intrusive images afterwards. So, I would see people with machete wounds in their heads and things walking down the street... which was disconcerting to say the least.

Int4: (...) I've seen [immigration] officers with their eyes full of tear, I've had tears in my eyes, there are people who cry and tell horrible stories... In that moment, my priority is for everything to be clearly understood, so I'm focused. Sometimes, I finish and go home, and it has affected me a little. It affected me but it's my job (...)

Int9: I went to court for a sexual assault, not assault, sexual... how do they call this?... unlawful touching, unlawful connection with minor, and I was the interpreter for the witness. (...) it became very emotional in court, this person started crying next to me while the interpreting was going on with the defence lawyer and the judge (...) I am not able to not reflect on things like that after I go home, it stays with me.

5. Discussion

The data presented above provides compelling evidence of significant emotional labour performed by public service interpreters. The testimonies in the study suggest shortcomings in the competencies required to perform emotion regulation safely. This finding echoes the critiques from other scholars about the cognitive-focused prevailing models of competence which fail to reflect the intricacies and complexities of the task (Bontempo & Napier, 2014; Cai et al., 2023; D'Hayer, 2006; Kaczmarek, 2010).

Strengthening the invisibility of affect as a valid component of interpreter competence is the insistence on relating professionalism to abidance by the code of ethics and centring interpreter training around such standards. The emphasis on accepted and expected parameters of performance often disregards the humanity in interpreters and any agency to interpret these tenets teleologically, i.e., in relation to the goal of the communicative event (e.g., Dean & Pollard, 2011). The present study found the dichotomy between perceived compliance with the code of ethics and affectivity to be a significant source of conflict and distress for interpreters. This finding aligns with similar contradictions found in studies on interpreting in conflict situations or with vulnerable clients like people from refugee backgrounds (González Campanella, 2022a; Jiménez Ivars, 2020; Todorova, 2020).

The identified gaps in affective skills are compounded by the interpersonal relationships informing the interpreter-mediated encounter. On the one hand, interpreters must navigate unclear roles and misunderstanding – mainly by service providers. On the other, beliefs about CALD clients, like the level of education, and the institutions in which interpreters operate, fuel feelings of empathy and create internal turmoil, particularly in relation to client trauma and vulnerability.

Despite the interpreter's noble intentions, some of the interventions resulting from these emotional responses can have a negative effect on trauma survivors, since lack of control and ongoing victimisation may lead to disempowerment and re-traumatisation (see Bancroft & Allen, 2018; Berthold & Fischman, 2014). Conversely, emotionally intelligent interpreters with key affective skills like controlled or cognitive empathy would be better equipped to practise trauma-informed interpreting. Despite the slow increase in awareness of the benefits of these approaches to ensure safe language support and protect interpreters, trauma-informed interpreting remains underdeveloped and relatively unknown in interpreter training and professional development.

In addition to the dangers for clients, the data presented above also evidenced the emotional consequences experienced by the interpreters due to this unsafe emotional labour. Adding to the body of literature documenting similar psycho-affective distress among public service interpreters (Darroch & Dempsey, 2016; Roberts, 2015; Splevins et al., 2010; Valero-Garcés, 2015), the study suggests that developing emotional competencies like adequate emotion regulation is fundamental to perform safe emotional labour.

The findings as discussed in the previous paragraphs have informed broader themes of contextual factors that condition the interpreters' emotional response. Such emotional labour has also been shown to affect practitioners and the service they provide. Figure 4 summarises these factors and their relationship.



Figure 4. Contextual factors conditioning emotional responses and influence on service provision and interpreter wellbeing.

It seems clear that affective training has been missing from interpreter education, whereas it should be embedded alongside other essential competencies. The question remains, however, how to develop such training and what components to include. To answer this, it is necessary to take an interdisciplinary approach and seek guidance from those disciplines with a longer tradition of affective training like psychology and social work. T&I can learn from the knowledge produced by scholars like Grandey and Gabriel (2015), Grant et al. (2015), Sewell (2020), Schutte et al. (2013) and others to develop its own model of affective competence.

The literature on emotional intelligence analysed for this article emphasised emotional literacy (Steiner, 1997) – i.e., learning about emotions, increasing emotion vocabulary, and understanding emotional reactions – as an essential aspect of successful emotion regulation. Other common elements among studies include strategies aimed at managing and reducing stress and developing a more mindful and reflective professional self (e.g., Schutte et al., 2013; Sewell, 2020). Also relevant for interpreters would be the ability to distinguish cognitive from emotional empathy (Yaseen & Foster, 2019), and a basic understanding of trauma (Bancroft, 2017; González Campanella, 2022a).

A series of methods appear in the literature on emotional intelligence pedagogy as ideal to achieve the goal of understanding and managing emotions, increasing self-awareness, improving self-care and producing well-rounded professionals. Common examples include the use of reflection (i.e., discussions, journaling), analysis of case studies, and performance of activities targeted at gaining insights from real-life scenarios (Sewell, 2020). The similarities with well-received training methods in T&I - like role-plays and situated or experiential learning (e.g., Crezee, 2015; González-Davies & Enríquez Raído, 2016) offer an encouraging prospect for applying an emotion regulation curriculum to extant training programmes.

The findings in this study and the supporting literature allow a first proposal of affective competencies that interpreters could develop through targeted training, as well as the methods and strategies that trainers could use to achieve them. The model below focuses on cognitive, physiological and holistic dimensions strengthened by such training, but such distinctions are largely theoretical and heavily intertwined in the student. The model is inspired by the map of emotion regulation teaching methods for social work by Sewell (2020, p. 9) and incorporates key notions in the work of Grandey & Gabriel (2015), Mastracci et al. (2010), Yaseen & Foster (2019), Bancroft (2017), and Bambaren-Call et al. (2012).

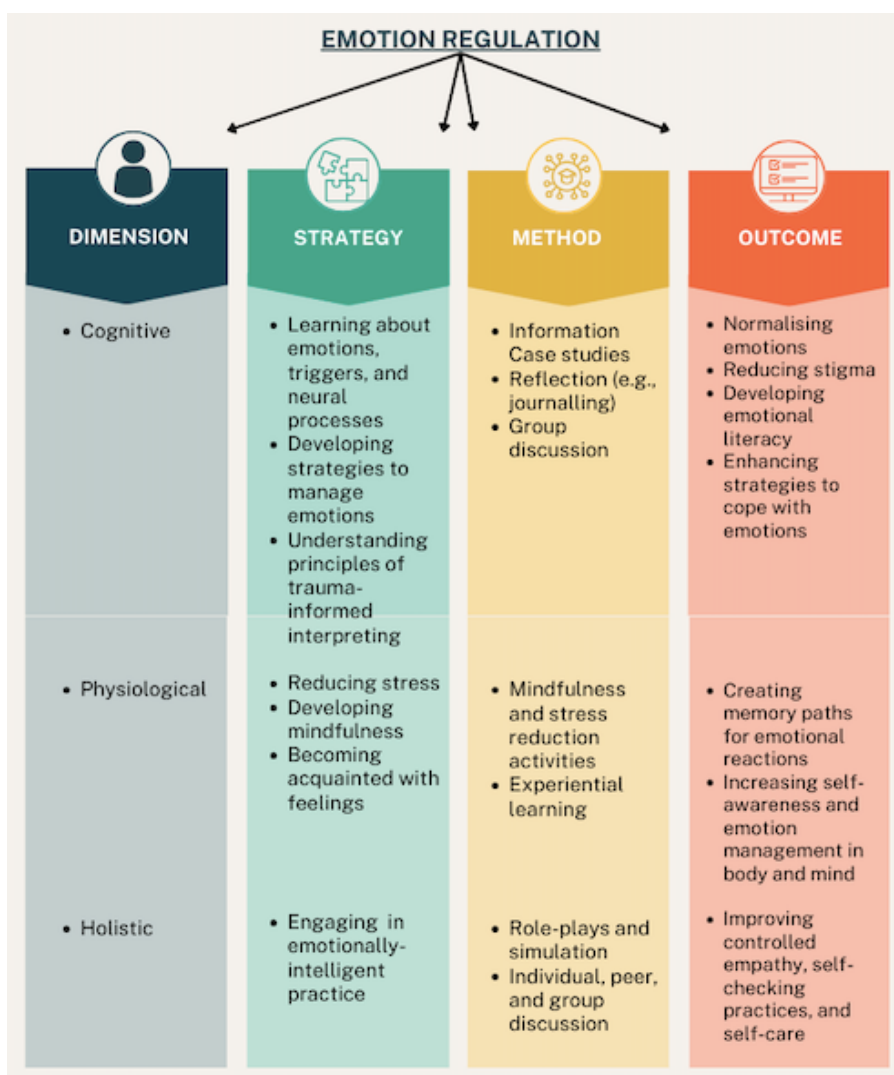


Figure 5. Model of emotion regulation teaching for public service interpreters and translators.

6. Conclusions

An expanded, holistic model including affective skills as meta-competencies alongside widely accepted operational competencies like language transfer would allow interpreters to exercise skills, knowledge, and judgement in their interpreting work. Such broader conceptualisation of interpreter competence could be a useful change in light of the nature of PSIT as a social practice. Therefore, training interpreters to learn how to identify their emotional reactions, including prejudices and biases, and differentiate between different types of empathic engagement, among other affective skills, could improve the professional experience for interpreters and service delivery for clients.

This paper outlined a series of factors that increase the emotional labour in PSIT, including the lack of dedicated training, ethical dilemmas created by restrictive codes of ethics and unclear role boundaries, as well as empathic engagement with clients. These factors not only enhance the challenges for interpreters without the necessary skills to regulate their emotions but also impact interpreter performance and interpreter wellbeing.

Similar to the discussion of an affective curriculum in other fields, a purposeful framework for teaching emotion regulation to interpreters would necessarily be underpinned by empirical inquiries like the one presented in this article. The findings outlined above relating to contextual factors enhancing emotional responses and the impact on the interpreter-mediated communication can thus guide new and broader competence models.

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