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# International cooperation as a contribution to the development of a complex profile of future public service interpreters / La cooperación internacional como contribución al desarrollo de un perfil complejo de los futuros intérpretes de los servicios públicos

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**Abstract:** The paper describes a particular platform for international bilateral and trilateral cooperation in the field of public service interpreting education in Slovakia, Austria and the Czech Republic. In this regard, the paper highlights the contribution of the initiative of the Working Group on Public Service Translation and Interpreting and Languages of Lesser Diffusion (WG PSIT & LLD) of the European Masters' in Translation network (EMT) under the umbrella of the European Directorate General for Translation (DGT) of the European Commission, which promotes the exchange of information and experiences of good practice between European countries and thus contributes to raising awareness of the importance of translation and interpreting in the processes of migrants' integration into the receiving societies. The paper presents the cooperation between the Department of Translation Studies of the Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra (Slovakia), the Centre for Translation Studies of the University of Vienna (Austria), and the Department of German Studies of the University of Ostrava (Czech Republic). It describes the current forms of joint activities for students from the three countries and evaluates their effectiveness. The article also suggests further possibilities for deepening contacts within the international academic environment and practice.

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**Keywords:** International cooperation; Public service interpreting; University education; Project education

**Resumen:** El artículo describe una plataforma particular para la cooperación internacional bilateral y trilateral en el ámbito de la interpretación en los servicios públicos en Eslovaquia, Austria y la República Checa. En este sentido, el documento destaca la contribución de la iniciativa del Grupo de Trabajo sobre Traducción e Interpretación de Servicio Público y Lenguas de Menor Difusión (WG PSIT & LLD) de la red de Másteres Europeos en Traducción (EMT) en el marco de la Dirección General Europea de Traducción (DGT) de la Comisión Europea, que promueve el intercambio de información y experiencias de buenas prácticas entre los países europeos y, contribuye, así, a concienciar sobre la importancia de la traducción y la interpretación en los procesos de integración de los inmigrantes en las sociedades receptoras. El artículo presenta la cooperación entre el Departamento de Estudios de Traducción de la Universidad Constantino el Filósofo de Nitra (Eslovaquia), el Centro de Estudios de Traducción de la Universidad de Viena (Austria) y el Departamento de Estudios Alemanes de la Universidad de Ostrava (República Checa), y describe las formas actuales de actividades conjuntas para estudiantes de los tres países y evalúa su eficacia. El artículo también sugiere otras posibilidades de profundizar los contactos en el entorno académico y la práctica internacional.

**Palabras clave:** Cooperación internacional; Interpretación en los servicios públicos; Enseñanza universitaria; Enseñanza de proyectos

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## 1. Introduction

The Working Group on Public Service Translation and Interpreting and Languages of Lesser Diffusion (WG PSIT & LLD) of the European Masters' in Translation network (EMT) under the umbrella of the European Directorate General for Translation (DGT) of the European Commission aims to contribute to one of the European Commission's priority lines: the efficient management of migration and asylum seekers and refugees<sup>1</sup>. The members of the working group are experts in public service translation and interpreting training from EMT member universities, but the group also receives strong input from practitioners, international institutions, and national and local organisations and associations from European countries that use translation and interpreting services to provide aid to migrants.

The activities of the working group are focused, i.a., on mapping topics of PSIT in Europe and training in translation and interpreting in languages of lesser diffusion. To this end, members of the group have conducted two rounds of surveys at European universities offering translation and interpreting study programmes in order to identify the composition of the working languages of students in these programmes and, to determine capacities and further potential in languages of lesser diffusion or languages of migrant communities in Europe. The working group also aims to identify needs and barriers to PSIT and LLD training in each country and to share experiences and examples of good practice. To this end, the members of the group meet regularly online to present the situation in each country in terms of training but, also, in terms of practice, presenting international, national and local associations and migrant support organisations, as well as institutions offering public service translation and interpreting.

The ambition of the working group is to develop recommendations for training in public service translation and interpreting on the basis of research and exchange of experience, and thus to contribute to improving the quality of training in this field on a Europe-wide scale. Such pan-European support for networking and exchange of experience has also resulted in specific cooperation between countries that are geographically close to each other but, have different experiences in the use of public service translation and interpreting in practice and in training in this field. In this paper we aim to describe the nature of the cooperation between the Department of Translation Studies of the Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra (Slovakia), the Centre for Translation Studies of the University of Vienna (Austria) and the Department of German Studies of the University of Ostrava (Czech Republic).

## 2. PSIT in practice and curricula in Slovakia, Austria and the Czech Republic

Although these countries are geographically very close to each other, the situation with regard to the practice and training of public service translation and interpreting is very different. In Austria, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, the professionalisation of public service translation and interpreting, qualification measures and training differ due to the political and historical contexts. Austria, on the one hand, is a country with a long tradition of welcoming migrants and the need to use translation and interpreting in community contexts is also reflected in the university training of future interpreters. In Slovakia and the Czech Republic, on the other hand, the issue of public service translation and interpreting has long been a marginal topic, as these countries have long ranked among the countries with the lowest numbers

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<sup>1</sup> Knowledge centre of interpretation. (n.d.) <https://knowledge-centre-interpretation.education.ec.europa.eu/en/knowledge-centre-communities/emt-psit-working-group-1ld#blog>.

of migrants in Europe. In 2020, for example, a total of 145,940 foreigners had a residence permit in Slovakia. A large proportion of them came from the Czech Republic, whereby there is almost no language barrier between the inhabitants of these countries, i.e. there is no need for linguistic and cultural mediation.<sup>2</sup>

However, the situation changed dramatically in February 2022 when war broke out in Ukraine. In March 2022, there were 38 refugees for every 1,000 Slovaks, which was the third highest number in Europe. Between February 2022 and February 2023, almost one million people crossed the Slovakian-Ukrainian border<sup>3</sup>. During the first year of the war, the number of citizens with residence permits in Slovakia approximately doubled<sup>4</sup>. The situation also escalated in the Czech Republic - in 2022, 500,000 refugees from Ukraine were granted asylum or a residence permit<sup>5</sup>, putting the Czech Republic in third place after Poland and Slovakia. The eastern city of Ostrava was the first destination on Czech territory to face major challenges due to the language barrier.

Since the outbreak of the war, there has been an enormous need for public service translation and interpreting and increased demand for interpreters in Slovakia and the Czech Republic. In these situations, it was very often lay interpreters - students, bilingual or multilingual volunteers without prior interpreter training or, in many cases, acquaintances and family members. It has become apparent that there is a lack of practical experience, in-depth expertise and helpful information (Hodáková & Ukušová, 2023). Accordingly, the need for professionalisation in the field of public service interpreting and support from universities has become the focus of discussions.

Training and professionalisation in the field of public service interpreting is handled differently at the departments in all three involved countries. At the Centre for Translation Studies at the University of Vienna an introduction in the BA programme and then specialisation in Dialogue Interpreting in the Master's programme in Interpreting is being offered. Teaching is underpinned by long-term research and numerous projects aimed at preparing training materials for (prospective) interpreters, teachers and trainers<sup>6</sup>.

The Department of Translation Studies in Nitra does not offer study programmes in public service interpreting or dialogue interpreting<sup>7</sup>. However, the Department is trying to respond to the emerging needs by developing project activities at national<sup>8</sup> and international level<sup>9</sup> working e.g. on interactive modules for the training of public service interpreters which can be included in the university curriculum or used in the training of ad hoc interpreters.

<sup>2</sup> IOM. (2023) <https://www.iom.sk/en/migration/migration-in-slovakia.html>

<sup>3</sup> UNHCR. (2024) <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics>

<sup>4</sup> IOM. (2023) <https://www.iom.sk/en/migration/migration-in-slovakia.html>

<sup>5</sup> Člověk v tísní. (2024) <https://www.clovekvtisni.cz/ukrajinska-krize-v-historickem-kontextu-8589gp>

<sup>6</sup> E.g. the Erasmus+ Project ReTrans: Working with interpreters in refugee transit zones (2024) <https://www.retrans-interpreting.com/team/>

<sup>7</sup> No university in Slovakia offers study programmes focused on public service interpreting or dialogue interpreting.

<sup>8</sup> E.g. the project Designing collaborative PSI training in Slovakia: development, implementation and evaluation of training courses for future public service interpreters (Vzdelávanie tlmočníkov, 2024). [www.vzdelavanietlmochnikov.sk](http://www.vzdelavanietlmochnikov.sk)

<sup>9</sup> E.g. the project Mental HEALTH 4 ALL: Development and implementation of a digital platform for the promotion of access to mental healthcare for low language proficient third-country nationals in Europe (MHealth4All, 2024). <https://www.mhealth4all.eu/>

In contrast, the university in Ostrava has not yet succeeded in developing projects or initiating effective cooperation despite the high demand for interpreting<sup>10</sup>. So far, the focus has been on providing immediate assistance to those in need, providing them with primary aid and services. There is still a lack of complex concepts that offer instructions, help and guidance for all stakeholders. In view of the different experiences of these three neighbouring countries, which have been affected by the refugee crisis, an exchange and intensive cooperation in practice and training of public service interpreting is more than desirable.

### 3. Key aspects of cross-border university exchange initiatives

Based on joint activities within the PSIT & LLD WG, the Centre for Translation Studies of the University of Vienna (Austria) and the Department of Translation Studies of the University of Constantine the Philosopher in Nitra (Slovakia) have expressed their interest in bilateral cooperation in the field of PSIT education. The activities later expanded into a trilateral cooperation with the Department of German Studies of the University of Ostrava (Czech Republic). The international bi/trilateral cooperation project fulfils several important criteria and requirements of modern higher education in transnational and global contexts. Especially for translation studies students, as future experts in multilingual communication, such exchange opportunities are very important.

First, in addition to traditional student and faculty mobility or curriculum internationalisation, bi-/trilateral cooperation projects, as a specific form of mobility settings, with their holistic approach, provide another means of promoting internationalisation in higher education, with the general aim of integrating inter/transcultural and global dimensions into study programmes, both subjective and institutional. The aim is to promote networked, innovative thinking and a deeper understanding of cultural diversity, which are essential for a well-rounded education in today's interconnected and globalised world<sup>11</sup>. The topic of the overall cooperation and the project presented in chapter 4 is in line with the principles and objectives of Global Citizenship Education<sup>12</sup>.

International cooperation brings together diverse expertise and promotes innovative approaches to global challenges. Especially in translation studies, which deal with transcultural and global issues, cooperation with institutions abroad is inevitable. Especially for all three universities, whose working languages are Czech, Slovak, and German, it is important for students to explore the topic of migration issues from the complex perspectives of the countries involved. In recent years, digitalisation and various communication tools have made virtual exchange programmes<sup>13</sup> widely available and have supported the accessibility of internationalisation efforts. However, our exchange project carried out on site offers an irreplaceable opportunity to experience reality first hand.

Secondly, the project described in chapter 4, as a competence- and process-oriented form of teaching with a focus on practice, creates an efficient and cooperative learning environment and is shown as an innovative method to meet the demands of modern education. Globally, higher education institutions are increasingly tasked with creating competence-based curricula that prepare students for both academic and professional

<sup>10</sup> More comprehensive activities in the field of training public service interpreters are offered by the Institute of Translation Studies at Charles University in Prague, Czech Republic.

<sup>11</sup> Bundesministerium für Bildung, Wissenschaft und Forschung (n. d.) [https://www.bmbwf.gv.at/Themen/HS-Uni/Europ%C3%A4ischer-Hochschulraum/Bologna-Prozess/hmis\\_2030.html](https://www.bmbwf.gv.at/Themen/HS-Uni/Europ%C3%A4ischer-Hochschulraum/Bologna-Prozess/hmis_2030.html)

<sup>12</sup> UNESCO (2024). <https://www.unesco.at/bildung/global-citizenship-education>

<sup>13</sup> Lehre Laden. (2024) <https://lehreladen.rub.de/lehrformate-methoden/virtual-exchange/>

paths. The project-based teaching method, directly embedded in the didactic concepts of the courses, represents a novel approach to education. In modern translation didactics, which is based on the social constructivist approach, learning through social interaction and communication plays a key role (Hansen-Schirra & Kiraly, 2013). This approach emphasizes that effective learning and the development of cognitive skills primarily occur through interaction with others. Thus, project work is used as a central teaching method, highlighting the importance of collaboration and real-world application in the learning process.

Thirdly, bi-/trilateral exchange projects are highly effective tools for deepening different competences. Project or simulated project work is the best way to acquire translation and interpreting skills. All competence models developed by different schools and researchers over the past decades agree that intercultural competence, together with communicative competence, is a crucial sub-competence within the overall translation competence (Wahberg, 2023). Due to the practical orientation of our project, there was a special focus on the acquisition of intercultural competence and socio-professional competences as understood e.g. by Kiraly (2000) or personal/ interpersonal and service provision competence as defined by the EMT competence framework (2022). Experience-based elements were heavily incorporated through the transfer of expertise and simulations were used as activities to recreate realistic scenarios.

#### **4. Competence - resilience - efficiency. Together on the way to a complex profile in the training of future public service interpreters**

The three university departments in Slovakia, Austria and Czech Republic have decided to collaborate in an international project supported by the Aktion Fund entitled *Kompetenz - Resilienz - Effizienz. Gemeinsam auf dem Weg zu einem komplexen Profil in der Ausbildung angehender Kommundolmetscher\*innen* [Competence - resilience - efficiency. Together on the way to a complex profile in the training of prospective public service interpreters]. As part of this pilot project (2023 - 2024), students from all three departments spent a year working together in the preparation, implementation and follow-up phases on the basics of interpreting in this special field of work, dealing with selected aspects of typical communication situations in PSI and developing the necessary interpreting skills.

The following main topics formed the framework:

- role definition and ethical aspects in public service interpreting;
- interpreting in social work, community work and healthcare settings;
- crisis interpreting in a humanitarian context;
- resilience and mental health in the interpreting profession.

The main aims of the pilot project were:

- exchange on current communication needs in all three project countries;
- exchange on project and research status in all three project countries;
- conveying the basics of community interpreting, different settings and modes;
- sensitising students to various transcultural communication situations in humanitarian contexts;

- applying acquired specialised knowledge and interpreting skills in simple real-life practical assignments;
- promoting interdisciplinary perspectives through innovative assignments;
- raising public awareness of the importance of translation and interpreting in refugee and arrival situations.

In order to achieve the project's aims, the following specific content was implemented:

- survey of the current status in the field of public service interpreting in the respective countries of the project (mapping of needs, stakeholders, profile of interpreters, communication situations and strategies, topics and possible applications);
- expansion of specialised knowledge (legal foundations of migration, theoretical foundations in the humanitarian context, ethical aspects of community interpreting, terminology, phases of interpreting work, etc.);
- development of students' skills and competences (workshops and modules on public service interpreting in different settings, lectures and practical training on resilience, coping and mental health in crisis interpreting);
- evaluation of the effectiveness of the training (complex evaluation of effectiveness and feedback on the learning and training process using real-life scenarios and simulations as well as authentic interactions);
- international awareness campaign among students on the topics of migration, interaction, inclusion and cultural sensitivity.

Different methods were used within the project content and activities:

- interactive and cooperative methods (discussions, practical exercises, simulations) were primarily used to train practical skills in specific roles, promote social interaction and encourage group dynamics; effective cooperation within the group was essential for the successful completion of the overall assignment;
- peer feedback was also used intensively;
- the supporting programme included online and onsite presentations and discussions by the project partners/stakeholders on the current situation in Austria, Slovakia and the Czech Republic.

The project activities were incorporated into the teaching and training at the respective institutes and the project aims corresponded to the current curricular content, methods and learning objectives at the participating institutes. The project was primarily aimed at the following target groups:

- BA students who already have some relevant skills in transcultural communication and wanted to develop them further in a specific area;
- the lectures and presentations were offered as mock conferences for students of the MA interpreting programmes in different working languages.

The main working languages of the project activities were German and Slovak or Czech, but students who did not speak any of these languages also took part in the project, creating an authentic language barrier that had to be overcome by means of interpreting.

#### 4.1 Pilot project evaluation: learning outcomes and feedback

To evaluate the effectiveness of the project activities, we collected feedback from students in the form of questionnaires at the end of the project in March 2024. A total of 19 students completed the questionnaire. The questionnaires were anonymous, consisting of 16 questions: 12 closed questions where students expressed strength of their agreement using a Likert scale (1- completely disagree, 5 - completely agree) and 4 open-ended questions on the overall evaluation of the project, the acquired knowledge, skills and methods used in the project. The closed questions covered the following learning outcomes:

1. awareness of the consequences of language barriers
2. awareness of the role of the interpreter
3. ability to explain the role of the interpreter
4. awareness of the differences between interpreter, intercultural mediator and translator
5. awareness of the importance of the quality of linguistic and cultural mediation
6. awareness of the importance of briefing before interpreting
7. awareness of the importance of using correct terminology in interpreting
8. awareness of the importance of short- and long-term preparation for interpreting
9. awareness of the importance of debriefing and feedback
10. identification with professional principles and ethics
11. ability to recognise an ethical dilemma and react appropriately
12. awareness of the importance of continuing education and self-development

The evaluation of the individual learning outcomes is presented in Table 1.

Learning outcome	Average score (N=19)
1. I am aware of the consequences of the language barrier in communication between foreigners and public institutions.	4.58
2. I am aware of the role interpreters play in communication between foreigners and public institutions.	4.42
3. I would be able to explain to others the role and tasks of an interpreter.	4.47
4. I can recognise and explain the differences between an interpreter, a cultural mediator and a translator.	4.21
5. I am aware of the importance of the quality of linguistic and cultural mediation for effective communication.	4.63
6. I am aware of the importance of briefing before interpreting.	4.58



7. I am aware of the importance of using correct terminology in crisis communication.	4.95
8. I am aware of the importance of short and long term preparation for interpreting.	5.00
9. I am aware of the importance of debriefing and feedback after interpreting.	4.79
10. I identify with the profession's ethical principles in interpreting.	4.42
11. I can recognize ethical dilemmas in interpreting and evaluate how to respond in these situations.	4.16
12. I am aware of the importance of continuing education and self-development in the field of public service interpreting.	4.95

*Table 1. Learning outcomes and their evaluation by students (1-completely disagree, 5-completely agree)*

As the objectives of this pilot project show, the learning outcomes were more focused on the level of awareness of the importance of specific aspects in public service interpreting. This is also linked to the fact that slightly lower scores (strength of agreement) were achieved by the outcomes related to the active role of students, the ability to explain some specifics of interpreting or to react in certain situations (outcomes 4 and 11) compared to the outputs focused more on the awareness of the importance of the specificities. The highest scores in the student evaluation were obtained in the learning outcomes related to awareness of the importance of short- and long-term preparation and continuing education and self-development in the interpreting profession, as well as the importance of using the correct terminology (outcomes 8, 12 and 7).

Concerning the open-ended responses in the questionnaire, these focused on the overall evaluation of the pilot project activities, the knowledge acquired, the skills developed and the methods used. The qualitative thematic analysis of these areas showed an overall positive evaluation of the project. The most frequent themes or key concepts in each question are presented in Table 2.

<b>Topic/ area:</b>	<b>Responses:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>overall evaluation of the pilot project activities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-interesting</li> <li>-educational/informative</li> <li>-practical</li> <li>-useful</li> <li>-well organised</li> <li>-comprehensive</li> <li>-goal-oriented</li> <li>-a good start for someone who wants to become a public service interpreter</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>acquired knowledge</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-important aspects in PSI</li> <li>-important principles in PSI (e.g. accuracy of interpretation)</li> <li>-types of (crisis) situations in PSI and how to deal with them</li> <li>-culture/cultural background of clients and their influence on communication</li> <li>-the role and the tasks of the interpreter</li> <li>-emotional aspects, empathy</li> <li>-ethical dilemmas</li> <li>-specificities of communication with particular groups (e.g. minors, deaf people)</li> <li>-realised the importance of preparation and feedback</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>developed skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-learning from the mistakes of others</li> <li>-patience</li> <li>-ability to handle criticism</li> <li>-teamwork</li> <li>-problem solving</li> <li>-empathy</li> <li>-adapting to the group</li> <li>-responsibility, discretion</li> <li>-attention to detail, quick reactions</li> <li>-accuracy in interpreting</li> <li>-communication and cooperation in an international team</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>evaluation of methods used</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-I liked the model situations (doctor-patient-interpreter) the best</li> <li>-I liked the detailed feedback on the simulations</li> <li>-it was difficult at the beginning, but then the cooperation was good and interesting</li> <li>-it was good to get to know students in other programs and other countries and to hear their perspective</li> <li>-I appreciated that we learned about practical experience</li> <li>-I listened to interesting lectures</li> <li>-I enjoyed when we worked in groups to come up with a hypothetical crisis situation</li> <li>-I liked the discussions/exchange of ideas</li> </ul>

*Table 2 Thematic analysis of open-ended questions in the questionnaire: overall evaluation, knowledge, skills, methods*

The analysis of the students' evaluation shows that the activities of the pilot project enabled them to acquire theoretical knowledge on the topics of transcultural communication, linguistic and cultural mediation, crisis communication and public service interpreting. The skills developed included specific techniques, strategies and principles that are applied in interpreting itself, but also more general skills (soft skills) that are applicable in different situations and contexts (e.g. teamwork, problem-solving, communication skills). Of the methods and procedures used in the different project activities, the students most appreciated the simulated situations (e.g. interpreted doctor's appointment) and the detailed feedback on their reactions in these situations. They also liked the discussions and group work that offered the opportunity to confront the perspectives of students from different universities in the three project countries.

The feedback helped the project coordinators<sup>14</sup> to evaluate the achievement of the pilot project aims. Following the success of the pilot project, they are interested in continuing joint activities in education and training. In future activities, the content of the project will move towards the fulfilment of learning objectives and outcomes that are targeted at a more active role of the students, i.e. from awareness of the importance of the different aspects of public service interpreting to the mastery of practical skills and strategies, to the acquisition of more complex competences in the field of public service translation and interpreting.

## 5. Conclusion

We conclude by summarising a few key aspects of the international project cooperation described in this paper:

- The partnership between the Department of Translation Studies at Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, the Centre for Translation Studies at the University of Vienna, and the Department of German Studies at the University of Ostrava has facilitated the exchange of practices and the development of students' specific knowledge, skills and attitudes.
- The international cooperation project described in this paper highlights the significant contributions to the development of a comprehensive profile for future public service interpreters.
- The trilateral cooperation between Slovakia, Austria and the Czech Republic demonstrates the importance of international exchange and cooperation in improving educational programmes and addressing real-world challenges.
- This cooperation aligns with the goals of the European Masters in Translation network (EMT) and the European Directorate General for Translation (DGT), aiming to improve training quality and awareness of the importance of public service translation and interpreting across Europe.
- The practical orientation of the project, involving real-life scenarios and simulations, has proved to be an effective method of competencies acquisition.
- By drawing on the strengths and experiences of each participating country, the project has successfully fostered an environment in which students can acquire vital intercultural, communicative and socio-professional competencies such as resilience and mental health, addresses the holistic needs of future interpreters.
- Feedback from students underlines the value of practical experience and the importance of preparation, briefing and debriefing in interpreting assignments.
- As evidenced by the pilot project's outcomes and student evaluations, there is a strong foundation for continued and expanded cooperation.

In conclusion, the international cooperation project described is an important step towards developing a well-rounded, competent and resilient profile for future public service interpreters.

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<sup>14</sup> The authors of this paper.

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