Document generated on 06/05/2025 8:52 a.m.

Meta
Journal des traducteurs
Translators' Journal

A Report on the Arctic College Interpreter-Translators Program

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Volume 38, Number 1, mars 1993

La traduction et l'interprétation dans le nord du Canada
Translation and Interpretation in Northen Canada

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/004087ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7202/004087ar

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Publisher(s)

Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal

ISSN

0026-0452 (print)
1492-1421 (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this article

Semsch, M. (1993). A Report on the Arctic College Interpreter-Translators Program. *Meta*, *38*(1), 96–97. https://doi.org/10.7202/004087ar

Article abstract

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A REPORT ON THE ARCTIC COLLEGE INTERPRETER-TRANSLATORS PROGRAM

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Résumé

Ce document relate brièvement les développements historiques dans la formation des traducteurs-interprètes des Territoires du Nord-Ouest. On y parle des origines des programmes actuels de traduction et d'interprétation sur le campus Thebacha, à Fort Smith, et sur le campus Nunatta d'Iqaluit, dont on présente les similarités et les différences. On y cite également les exigences d'admission et les cours offerts, en plus d'exposer quelques-uns des défis relevés au cours de la formation des traducteurs et des interprètes aborigènes.

Abstract

This report briefly outlines the historical developments of interpreter/translator training in the Northwest Territories. It describes the origins of the present Arctic College I/T programs at the Thebacha Campus in Fort Smith and Nunatta Campus in Iqaluit and describes their similarities and differences. It outlines admission requirements and course offerings and discusses some of the challenges faced in training aboriginal translators and interpreters.

Interpreter/translator training began in the NWT in 1979 with the formation of the Interpreter Corps by the Department of Information. This evolved into the Language Bureau when the department became Culture & Communications. Today, the department provides on-the-job training for persons speaking English plus Inuktitut or a Dene language. Employees are required to perform both interpretation and translation, into and out of both languages, in all subject areas.

In 1986 the Task Force on Aboriginal Languages recommended that a formal program for I/Ts be developed and offered by Arctic College. The following year a one year certificate program was developed by Marilyn Phillips, Coordinator/Instructor, with the assistance of the Language Bureau staff. A second year diploma program is now in place. The program is offered at two Arctic College campuses, Thebacha in Fort Smith and Nunatta in Iqaluit.

The two programs differ by the languages that they serve and the scheduling of courses. Thebacha campus trains speakers of the Dene languages while Nunatta campus has only Inuit students. In order to accommodate part-time students from various government agencies the Thebacha campus offers most of their courses in blocks of time. This is also necessary because many courses are taught by contract instructors from various parts of Canada. In Iqaluit there are two full-time instructors who do most of the teaching, and several of the courses are taught over the semester.

Applicants must have completed Grade 10 and be fluent in a Dene language or Inuktitut. The Inuit must also be literate in both languages. Since a standardized system of writing Athapaskan languages has only recently been accepted, Dene students learn to write their languages within the program. These languages are Gwich'in, North Slavey, South Slavey, Dogrib, and Chipewyan.

A wide variety of courses is offered in the program to fill educational and experiential gaps and to prepare the students for the employment opportunities which exist in the NWT. These courses are Professional Development, Northern Studies, Keyboarding, Communications, Speech and Performance, Listening Labs, English Writing Lab, Dene literacy/Inuktitut Writing Lab, Linguistics, Morphology and Phonology (Inuktitut), Translation Methods, Interpreting Methods, Simultaneous and Consecutive Interpretating, and two Practica.

In keyboarding students are first taught to use a typewriter and then learn word processing on the Macintosh computer for which the Inuktitut and Dene fonts have been developed.

For the practica students are placed in actual job locations, usually with the government, which is the largest employer of interpreter/translators at this time.

The interpreting/translating courses deal with courts, education, health, renewable resources, government structure, and current political issues.

An Advisory Committee consisting of representatives from the organizations presently using the services of I/Ts meets two or three times a year with the coordinators of the program to ensure that training is meeting the needs of the work force. Their role is that of support and guidance.

Some of the challenges facing the instructors are how to increase general knowledge and low English/Aboriginal Language comprehension and writing levels in a short space of time. The intent of the program is to introduce people to the field of interpreting/translating and to give them some basics on which to build. The staff and students recognize that an eight-month program is not sufficient to give them the skills and confidence that they need to go out in the field and students are strongly encouraged to complete the second year of the program.

The Nunatta program has affiliated with McGill University, and students completing the two-year diploma program also receive a certificate in Inuktitut Translation and Community Interpretation from McGill. It is hoped that eventually this could become a degree program if 2 or 3 more years were added to the existing program.

Another challenge facing the staff is that of evaluation. Test for Native language fluency and literacy are scarce and really in the experimental stages. The question always arises as to who is qualified to evaluate if the evaluator has never been evaluated. No person speaking languages native to the NWT has ever completed a degree program in interpreting or translating nor has anyone written the CTIC exam in any of those languages. The elders are considered to be the authorities on language but many of them are unilingual and illiterate, thus limiting the type of evaluation that can be performed by them.

A serious threat to the continuation of the program is the low full-time enrolment in the program. Most applicants are older, married, and have employment histories, but both campuses lack enough family housing. Potential students are unwilling to come without their families because it is not possible to travel the great distances home for visits.

Another reason for the low enrollment is that interpreter/translators are in such demand that they can find employment without training. Very often the skills that they have make them desirable employees in many different fields, such as health, social services, and media.

As the public and the government in the NWT come to view interpreting and translating as a profession, hopefully more people will see the need for training. Also, with the new legislation making the Dene and Inuktitut languages official in the NWT, we will see many more opportunities opening up in this field, thus encouraging people to enter our program.