

Good intentions or irresponsibility? Ethics and risks of professional practice without adequate training in sign language interpreting

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ABSTRACT

This essay offers a critical reflection on the risks associated with professional interpreting practice in contexts where training and experience remain insufficient. It examines the figure of the interpreter who practices without being fully prepared, addressing concepts such as professional encroachment, unintentional negligence, and insufficient training—not as punitive categories, but as transitional states that must be recognized and addressed through guidance and ethical responsibility. Through an analysis of underlying causes, risk profiles, and both institutional and individual consequences, it argues that practicing without adequate preparation entails not only technical shortcomings but also an ethical omission.

Keywords:

Professional encroachment; negligence; interpreting ethics; professional training; sign language interpreter; professional responsibility; supervised practice; vocation and preparation.

INTRODUCTION

“Let each person devote themselves to the practice of the profession they know well.”

— Cicero

In various professional fields—especially those that still lack a contextualized professional profile, such as sign language interpreters in Ecuador—vocation is often considered an intrinsic and highly valued attribute. However, goodwill or enthusiasm alone cannot and should not replace rigorous training, the acquisition of experience, or the technical mastery required in any professional practice.

Although in many cases actions do not stem from ill intent, they may still lead to ethical and professional consequences. Unfortunately, within this context, the legal responsibility of interpreters is not yet fully defined or integrated, which increases the risk of individuals practicing without guarantees for users or a clear framework for those assuming this role.

Within this framework, a critical yet open perspective is proposed—one that invites reflection on the importance of continuous training processes, professional

supervision, and the ethical humility of acknowledging *“I am not yet ready.”*

THEMATIC DEVELOPMENT

Theoretical Framework and Background

Professional encroachment refers to *“the performance of professional acts by someone who lacks the official or academic qualification required to do so,”* thus describing the act of practicing a profession without the necessary accreditation, preparation, or experience (RAE, 2025). Beyond its legal dimension, this phenomenon carries profound ethical implications, as interpreters are professionals who ensure the right to communication for Deaf individuals.

Unlike malpractice—which involves the improper execution of a profession by someone qualified—encroachment occurs prior to training: it is the act of practicing without the necessary foundation.

On the other hand, professional negligence may occur even when basic training exists, but the individual acts without due care or fails to recognize their limitations.

According to the legal dictionary of the RAE (2025), it is defined as “*the omission of due care through inaction, negligence, or incorrect, inadequate, or insufficient action.*” While often associated with incompetence, in this context it is approached as a form of *professional immaturity*—a stage in development where further training and experience are required to perform responsibly as a professional interpreter.

To better understand the ethical decisions faced by interpreters in training or premature practice, it is essential to consider theoretical frameworks that acknowledge the complexity of the interpretive act. In this regard, the **Uncertainty Model (UM)** proposed by Barreto (2023) is particularly relevant. The author argues that interpreting occurs in scenarios marked by unpredictability, where certainty is the exception rather than the rule. From this perspective, an ethical interpreter is not one who blindly follows a code, but one who manages risk responsibly, learns from mistakes, and makes informed, adaptive decisions.

Barreto introduces the concept of **antifragility**, understood as the

professional’s ability to grow stronger through chaos, recognizing that there are no single solutions, but rather multiple valid responses that must be negotiated through ethical judgment (see Figure 1).



Figure 1

Interpreting situation in which ethical and communicative tensions are evident.

Note. Image created by the *Mente Abierta* editorial team (2025).

This perspective aligns with the proposal of González-Montesino, Calle-Alberdi, and Saavedra-Rodríguez (2022), who demonstrate that future sign language interpreters must confront dilemmas that cannot be resolved simply by following rules. Their study highlights the need to train professionals capable of deliberating, deciding, and acting with contextual awareness, particularly in situations where the rights of Deaf individuals are at stake.

Models such as the Demand-Control Schema and Role Space enable this contextual analysis by integrating emotional, power-related, social, and environmental factors, as well as the consequences for all parties involved.

Both perspectives agree that professional ethics cannot be reduced to mere compliance with codes, but must be cultivated as a capacity for critical reflection and contextualized action. Thus, acting without adequate preparation is not only a technical issue, but also an ethical omission that disregards the complex responsibility of mediating communication for priority groups.

One of the main causes of premature professional practice is the lack of regulation or institutional permissiveness. In many contexts—especially in community, educational, and governmental settings—professionals in training or with limited experience are often relied upon without establishing supervision or support mechanisms. This situation is further aggravated when clear boundaries are not defined between the role of a “trainee” and that of a “professional interpreter.”

Another common cause is social or economic pressure. Professionals, driven by the need for income or recognition, may accept assignments for which they are not prepared, relying on intuition or general empirical knowledge that lacks a solid foundation. In such cases, vocation becomes a dangerous justification that can legitimize avoidable errors, particularly in institutions where there is no clear understanding of the interpreter’s professional role and occupational profile.

There is also a frequent confusion between “vocation” and “qualification.” Feeling passionate about a profession is not synonymous with being prepared to practice it. Vocation, like motivation, is a valuable driving force; however, it requires technical, ethical, and human training in order to become a responsible professional practice aligned with the principles and demands of the discipline.

These causes give rise to different risk profiles that characterize various forms of irresponsible practice. Five observable profiles in the professional field are described below:

First, there are professionals who, driven by confidence in their instincts, enthusiasm, or prior achievements, assume they possess the necessary competencies to act without external validation or certification. This overestimation of skills can generate a false sense of security, where the absence (or even the presence) of visible errors is mistakenly interpreted as proof of competence. This may lead to avoidance of the individual responsibility that every professional must assume. However, failing to recognize one's own limitations or to engage in feedback and objective evaluation processes can result in incorrect decisions that affect others. In these cases, the issue does not lie in intention, but in the lack of self-criticism and professional awareness, highlighting the need to cultivate an ethics grounded in evaluation and self-assessment prior to practice.

A second case involves the experienced professional who believes that their trajectory exempts them from updating their knowledge, reviewing their practices, integrating theoretical foundations, maintaining connections with the community, or even keeping their

interpreting skills active. While experience is undeniably valuable, it does not guarantee the relevance or currency of professional interventions. Knowledge evolves, language changes, and social, technological, and human demands shift; refusing to continue training can lead to stagnation and outdated practices that limit the positive impact of professional work. In this sense, continuous training is not an external imposition, but a commitment by the interpreter to the quality and relevance of the service provided.

In the academic sphere, as a third case, there are professionals with strong theoretical knowledge who have devoted their careers to the in-depth study of a field. While their contribution is invaluable for the development of knowledge and critical thought, a risk arises when this theoretical training is directly transferred to practice without prior experience in real-world application contexts. This disconnect can affect the effectiveness of interventions, as experience plays a crucial role not only in technical execution but also in acting with judgment and timeliness. This is not to discredit theory, but to emphasize that

practice requires not only knowing, but knowing how to act and how to be.

Another profile that poses risks in professional interpreting practice is that of the specialist who prefers to work in isolation, without openness to collaboration or the exchange of perspectives. There are specific contexts in which interpreters must necessarily work as part of a team; this is not optional, but a fundamental component of ensuring quality and ethical service. Refusing to engage in dialogue, coordination, or feedback not only limits personal growth but also affects service quality, as a single perspective tends to reproduce biases, reduce innovation, and weaken support networks. Ethical professional practice therefore requires openness to dialogue, cooperation, and the humility to share responsibilities.

Finally, there is the case of the interpreter who has been away from professional practice for an extended period. Professional inactivity can lead to a gradual deterioration of previously acquired competencies—whether communicative, linguistic, sociolinguistic, or cognitive—especially in fields where

practices and contexts evolve rapidly. Returning to practice without a phase of updating, review, or professional support may result in repeated errors, outdated approaches, or insufficient tools to meet current demands. In such cases, ethical commitment also requires recognizing the need for retraining before resuming professional duties (see Figure 2).



Figure 2

Professional exchange and ethical reflection are essential to prevent isolated practices, lack of updating, and risks in the quality of interpreting services.

Note. Image created by the Mente Abierta editorial team (2025).

Professional exchange and ethical reflection are essential to prevent isolated practices, lack of updating, and risks to the quality of interpreting services. Image created by the *Mente Abierta* editorial team (2025).

Consecuencias del ejercicio no preparado y la responsabilidad compartida: ámbitos académicos y decisiones éticas individuales.

The consequences of acting without being adequately prepared can be serious, both for those who receive the service and for those who provide it. First, there may be direct harm: inaccurate interpretations, poorly grounded decisions, or inappropriate interventions. A misinterpretation can compromise the fundamental rights of Deaf individuals.

Second, there is an impact on the profession itself. Irresponsible practice deteriorates the public image of the discipline, generates distrust, and trivializes the process of professional training. It also affects the professional's own image: assuming responsibilities for which one is not prepared can lead to a loss of trust from both the community and institutions. Additionally, it may result in increased stress, burnout, frustration, and the development of poor habits that are difficult to unlearn.

While academic institutions are not directly responsible for the actions of their

graduates, they do bear a degree of responsibility in the comprehensive training of professionals. The way curricula are structured, the availability of supervised practice, the evaluation of competencies, and the promotion of professional ethics all influence the level of maturity with which future professionals assume their roles.

However, the ultimate responsibility lies with the individual who decides to act without being prepared. Institutions may train, guide, and warn, but it is the professional who must act with judgment, honesty, and responsibility. Individual ethical judgment is non-negotiable; therefore, practicing without being ready cannot be justified by institutional gaps—it is a personal decision that entails consequences.

In response to this issue, it becomes essential to promote a culture of continuous learning, where the value of guided practice, professional mentorship, and the humility to say “*not yet*” are recognized.

Educational institutions play a key role by establishing clear stages of training and

providing real opportunities for supervision. At the same time, supervisory institutions—both public and private—must understand that the presence of trainees does not imply a replacement of staff nor justify their use as unpaid labor. The role of the trainee is part of a formative process within a real work environment and does not exempt the host institution, nor the State, from guaranteeing adequate accessibility conditions for all individuals, including those with hearing disabilities, in accordance with their specific needs.

The responsibility to ensure inclusive, accessible environments that respect human rights cannot be delegated or minimized by the presence of students in training.

It is essential to foster an ethical awareness of one's own limitations, recognizing that practicing a profession is not merely a technical act, but a profound human responsibility. Therefore, acknowledging the need for further training or experience is not a sign of weakness, but of professional maturity (see Figure 3).



Figure 3

The demands of interpreting practice make continuous training essential to ensure ethical and responsible performance.

Note. Image created by the *Mente Abierta* editorial team (2025).

CONCLUSIONS

Practicing without adequate preparation is not merely a technical error; it constitutes an ethical violation. Although it often stems from a genuine desire to help, acting without proper training can cause irreparable harm, undermining the credibility and legitimacy of the entire profession. Interpreting is not simply about “moving hands” to convey a message; rather, it requires technical, ethical, and human preparation that is progressively developed through guidance, critical reflection, and situated experience.

There is an urgent need for a training culture that values supervision, collaborative work, context-based ethical practice, and continuous evaluation of the interpreter’s professional conduct. In this way, it is possible to ensure not only the quality of interpreting services, but also respect for the individuals and communities they serve. Responsibility often begins with the humility to recognize that one is still in the process of learning and professional development.

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