EDICIONES COMPLUTENSE

Estudios de **Traducción**
ISSN: 2174-047X

MONOGRÁFICO

Training Non-Professional Interpreters and Translators in Public Services: DIALOGOS

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https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/estr.100786 Recibido: 6 de febrero de 2025 / Revisado: 1 de septiembre de 2025 / Aceptado: 9 de septiembre de 2025

Abstract. The growing diversity of migrant populations in Europe has heightened the demand for communication across languages of lesser diffusion (LLD). While professional translators and interpreters exist for majority languages, gaps remain for communities speaking recently arrived or low-resource languages. In these cases, non-professional interpreters and translators (NPITs)—often bilingual or heritage speakers with little or no formal training—frequently bridge communication in healthcare, legal, and humanitarian settings. The Erasmus+ DIALOGOS project sought to address this situation by mapping LLDs in Spain, Italy, and Greece, identifying communication needs, and developing a training module for NPITs. This article presents the rationale, methodology, results, and reflections from the project. The study combined surveys and interviews with stakeholders, an analysis of existing resources, and a pilot training course. Findings reveal significant reliance on NPITs in public service settings, major training gaps, and the need to balance urgent communication demands with ethical and professional standards. The pilot course confirmed the feasibility of training NPITs in essential interpreting and translation skills, though challenges remain in scaling up training and ensuring professional recognition. The article situates these findings in the broader scholarship on NPIT, crisis translation, and public service interpreting, highlighting the risks, opportunities, and directions for future work.
Keywords. translation and interpreting in public services, languages of lesser diffusion, training, migration, NPIT.

La formación de intérpretes y traductores no profesionales en los servicios públicos: DIALOGOS

Resumen. La creciente diversidad de las poblaciones migrantes en Europa ha incrementado la demanda de comunicación en lenguas de menor difusión (LMD). Mientras que para las lenguas mayoritarias existen intérpretes y traductores profesionales, persisten vacíos en el caso de comunidades que hablan lenguas recientemente introducidas o con escasos recursos lingüísticos. En estos contextos, los intérpretes y traductores no profesionales (ITNP), a menudo bilingües o hablantes de herencia con poca o ninguna formación formal, desempeñan un papel fundamental en entornos sanitarios, jurídicos y humanitarios. El proyecto Erasmus+ DIALOGOS buscó dar respuesta a esta situación mediante el mapeo de LMD en España, Italia y Grecia, la identificación de necesidades comunicativas y el desarrollo de un módulo formativo para ITNP. Este artículo presenta los fundamentos, la metodología, los resultados y las reflexiones derivadas del proyecto. El estudio combinó encuestas y entrevistas con agentes clave, un análisis de recursos formativos existentes y un curso piloto de formación. Los resultados muestran una fuerte dependencia de ITNP en los servicios públicos, carencias formativas significativas y la necesidad de equilibrar la urgencia comunicativa con los estándares éticos y profesionales. El curso piloto confirmó la viabilidad de formar ITNP en competencias básicas de traducción e interpretación, aunque persisten retos en su ampliación

y reconocimiento profesional. El artículo sitúa estos hallazgos en el contexto académico sobre NPIT y traducción en crisis, destacando riesgos, oportunidades y futuras líneas de trabajo.
Palabras clave: traducción e interpretación en los servicios públicos, lenguas de menor difusión, formación, migración, intérpretes y traductores no profesionales (ITNP).

1. Introduction

Over the last thirty years, the story of Southern Europe has been rewritten by migration. Spain, Italy, and Greece—once known as countries of departure—are now places of arrival, where thousands seek safety, work, or simply the chance to start over. This demographic change has reshaped entire neighbourhoods and schools, but it has also transformed the languages spoken in hospitals, courtrooms, and refugee reception centres.

These changes have brought opportunities and challenges. Access to public services—whether healthcare, justice, or education—depends on communication. Yet in many encounters, the professionals providing these services do not share a language with the people who need them. For widely spoken languages such as Arabic, English, or Chinese, professional interpreters are sometimes available. But for languages of lesser diffusion (LLDs)—Wolof, Bambara, Somali, or Pashto—the story is very different. In these cases, communication is often carried by ordinary bilinguals: neighbours, friends, NGO staff, or even children.

These non-professional interpreters and translators (NPITs) are simultaneously invisible and indispensable. Without them, institutions would grind to a halt; with them, communication flows, but not without risks. Confidentiality may be compromised, messages may be simplified or altered, and interpreters may feel torn between neutrality and advocacy. As one Italian asylum officer put it: *Senza interpreti adeguati, rischiamo di non capire le storie dei richiedenti asilo* ('Without proper interpreters, we risk not understanding asylum seekers' stories').

European policy documents routinely emphasise the importance of language in integration. The European Commission's *Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021–2027* calls language "the key to participation," and the Council of Europe insists on the right "to understand and to be understood." Yet these frameworks often assume the presence of professional interpreters, overlooking the everyday reality of NPITs.

It was within this gap—between policy ideals and lived realities—that the Erasmus+ project DIALOGOS (2022–2024) was conceived. Its aims were threefold: (1) To map the presence of LLDs in public services and document communication practices across Spain, Italy, and Greece; (2) To collect and analyse available training resources for NPITs and public service interpreters; (3) To design, implement, and evaluate a short training course tailored for NPITs.

The project did not seek to replace professionalisation but to test a pragmatic form of qualification: targeted training to reduce risks and enhance confidence for those already acting as interpreters in their communities.

This article examines to what extent short-term qualification initiatives can respond to communication gaps involving NPITs in LLD contexts, and situates the findings within current debates on ethics, training, and professionalisation.

This article presents the main outcomes of DIALOGOS and situates them within current debates on NPIT. It makes four contributions: first, by offering empirical data on NPIT practices in three Mediterranean countries; second, by mapping LLD needs and resources; third, by analysing the outcomes of a pilot training course; and fourth, by reflecting on the broader implications for ethics, policy, and practice.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Defining NPIT and its Evolution

The concept of non-professional interpreting and translation (NPIT) has emerged as a distinct field of inquiry over the past two decades, though the practice itself is far older. NPIT refers to translation and interpreting activities carried out by individuals without formal training, professional accreditation, or recognition in the labour market (Antonini 2021, Angelelli 2020). NPITs include family members, friends, bilingual community members, volunteers, NGO staff, or even children who interpret informally in healthcare, legal, educational, and humanitarian settings.

Early scholarship often framed NPIT as a "deficient" practice, measured against professional standards and codes of ethics (Hale 2014). This "deficit perspective" portrayed NPIT as risky, error-prone, and ultimately undesirable. Over time, however, the academic lens shifted toward recognising NPIT as a socially embedded, context-driven practice with its own logics and forms of expertise. Aguilar-Solano (2015) showed how volunteer

interpreting in Spanish healthcare simultaneously empowers bilingual community members and exposes them to institutional exploitation. Monzó-Nebot & Wallace (2020) argue that NPIT must be understood within broader socio-ethical frameworks, since it disrupts assumptions of neutrality and invisibility central to professional codes.

This evolution reflects a growing recognition that NPIT is not a temporary anomaly but a structural feature of migration societies. It is particularly relevant in contexts of linguistic superdiversity (Vertovec 2007), where the sheer number of languages spoken by migrant communities makes universal professional provision impossible.

2.2 NPIT in Healthcare Contexts

Healthcare settings are among the most researched domains of NPIT because of the potentially life-threatening consequences of miscommunication. Studies across Europe and beyond have documented widespread reliance on family members, especially children, to interpret medical consultations. This practice raises significant concerns for confidentiality, role inversion, and emotional burden (Valero-Garcés 2021).

Aguilar-Solano (2015) found that Spanish hospitals often depend on volunteers and NGO staff to bridge language gaps. Similar findings have been reported in Italy, where cultural mediators play hybrid roles that combine interpreting with advocacy, and in Greece, where NGOs provide *ad hoc* interpreting in refugee camps. Research in the United States and Australia echoes these trends: informal interpreters are ubiquitous, especially in immigrant communities with LLDs (Hale 2014).

The risks are well documented: partial or inaccurate interpretations can compromise diagnoses, patients may withhold sensitive information when interpreted by family members, and clinicians may develop unsafe workarounds. Yet NPIT also ensures basic access to care where professional interpreters are absent. This duality—indispensable yet risky—remains at the heart of the NPIT debate.

2.3. NPIT in Asylum and Legal Settings

The asylum and legal domains present equally pressing challenges. Asylum seekers often face credibility assessments, interviews, and court hearings in which interpretation quality can determine the outcome of their case. Federici et al. (2019) document how reliance on untrained interpreters compromises due process, sometimes leading to wrongful rejections of asylum claims.

In Greece, for example, asylum officers report frequent reliance on bilingual community members or NGO staff, with inconsistent accuracy. In Italy, cultural mediators often act as interpreters in police interviews or legal consultations without formal training in legal terminology. Spain faces similar challenges in asylum hearings and judicial contexts, where the availability of interpreters in languages such as Wolof, Bambara, or Pashto is extremely limited.

These practices raise serious questions about the right to a fair trial and the principle of "understanding and being understood" enshrined in European legal frameworks. The risks are heightened when children are used as interpreters, a practice reported in both our project data and previous literature.

2.4. NPIT in Humanitarian and Educational Contexts

Humanitarian contexts, such as refugee camps, shelters, or reception centres, often rely heavily on NPITs. NGOs typically employ bilingual staff whose primary role is not interpreting but who perform translation alongside other duties. This leads to role conflict and overburdening, as documented by Valero-Garcés (2021). In emergency situations—natural disasters, pandemics, or armed conflict—the reliance on NPITs becomes even more pronounced, given the urgency of communication (Federici et al. 2019).

In education, the role of NPITs is less studied but equally significant. Teachers, administrators, and parents frequently rely on bilingual students or community members for interpretation in parent-teacher meetings, enrolment procedures, and disciplinary contexts. The CHILD-UP project highlighted children's agency in multilingual encounters, showing how pupils themselves become mediators of communication. While this agency can be empowering, it also raises concerns about role inversion and the emotional burden placed on children.

2.5 Ethical Debates and Role Boundaries

Ethics is perhaps the most contentious issue in NPIT scholarship. Professional codes emphasise confidentiality, impartiality, and accuracy. NPITs, however, are deeply embedded in the communities they serve, often interpreting for neighbours, friends, or relatives. This proximity complicates adherence to neutrality and raises dilemmas around advocacy.

Monzó-Nebot & Wallace (2020) argue that NPIT requires a reconceptualization of ethics, one that acknowledges relationality and community embeddedness. Rather than expecting NPITs to replicate professional standards, training should adapt ethical principles to their realities. Our project data confirm this: participants reported difficulty separating their interpreting role from their community role, but valued training in recognising ethical dilemmas.

2.6. Qualification versus Professionalisation

A recurring debate in NPIT literature concerns the distinction between qualification and professionalisation. Antonini (2021) defines qualification as short-term, targeted training initiatives designed to provide basic skills

and awareness. Professionalisation, by contrast, requires sustained education, accreditation mechanisms, and labour market integration.

Projects such as DIALOGOS position themselves in the qualification paradigm. The aim is not to transform NPITs into professionals but to enhance their immediate effectiveness and reduce risks. Valero-Garcés (2021) underscores that qualification can be impactful, especially in LLD contexts where professionalisation is unrealistic in the short term. At the same time, some scholars warn that focusing exclusively on qualification risks entrenching NPIT as a second-class solution rather than building pathways toward professional recognition.

2.7. European Research and Projects

Several EU-funded projects have advanced the field: CHILD-UP (2019–2022, H2020, Grant No. 822400): focused on migrant children's agency in communication, documenting the role of children as language brokers; REACTme (2020–2023): developed training for emergency interpreting in medical and humanitarian crises, offering resources directly applicable to NPIT contexts; TraiLLD (2021–2024): created digital resources and glossaries for interpreters working with LLDs; FITISPos (University of Alcalá): has long contributed to PSIT research and training, producing bilingual glossaries, training modules, and publications that integrate community interpreting into academic frameworks.

DIALOGOS builds on and extends these initiatives by combining empirical mapping, resource analysis, and pilot training, with a specific focus on LLDs in Mediterranean contexts.

2.8. International Perspectives

Beyond Europe, scholarship in Australia, Canada, and Latin America offers valuable comparative insights. Angelucci & Wilson (2024) describe a co-designed training model for NPITs in regional Australia, emphasising participatory pedagogy and solidarity networks. In Canada, community interpreting has been progressively professionalised, with certification schemes and standards (Hale 2014). In Latin America, interpreting for indigenous languages remains largely non-professional, relying on bilingual community members and raising challenges like those observed in Europe (García et al. 2018).

These cases illustrate the diversity of NPIT trajectories worldwide, ranging from informal, unrecognised practices to institutionalised certification. They highlight both the challenges and the potential pathways for European contexts.

2.9. The DIALOGOS Project

Despite significant progress, key gaps remain in NPIT research: (1) Limited empirical data on NPIT practices in Southern Europe, especially with respect to LLDs. (2) Insufficient mapping of resources tailored to NPITs. (3) Few pedagogical experiments testing the feasibility of qualification initiatives. (4) Underexplored intersections between NPIT, digitalisation, and remote interpreting.

As already established, the DIALOGOS project (2022-1-ES01-KA220-HED-000086867) arose from the need to address migrants' communication barriers, specifically migrants from countries with LLD for which there is a hortage of qualified translators and interpreters, by creating a training module and materials designed for heritage and bilingual migrant speakers of LLD who could possibly become public service interpreters and translators (PSITs) and who already play such roles in reality. The overarching objective was to increase equal opportunities for all citizens in Europe, not only for those who speak majority languages. The main target group involved citizens from all age groups and genders who came from a migrant background to enable them to engage, to learn and to participate in civic society, as well as to improve their social status and economic situations.

Southern Mediterranean countries experience migration flows of migrants and asylum seekers who tend to use the Central Mediterranean route to enter the EU irregularly, particularly migrants from North Africa who want to cross the Mediterranean Sea to reach Europe. The countries that are involved in this project (Greece, Italy and Spain) are the gateway to Europe, with most migrants arriving in these countries but wanting to move on to Northern European countries. Thus, these countries are transitional countries for migrants, and their needs concerning incoming migration are different from those of Northern European countries. As these countries are the first point of entry, multicultural and multilingual professionals must help migrants from the outset. The three Mediterranean countries' universities that were involved in the project were the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki in Greece, Genoa University in Italy and the University of Alcalá in Spain. The project also included three civic social organisations, one from each country, with the intention of academic institutions collaborating with real, hands-on NGO workers and civic associations to observe their existing training programmes to inform adapted training programmes in the future.

The DIALOGOS project addresses the key gaps in NPIT by providing empirical evidence from Spain, Italy, and Greece; mapping LLDs and resource availability; designing and testing a qualification-based training model; engaging directly with NPITs and service providers to co-create solutions. This contribution situates DIALOGOS as an innovative step in bridging theory and practice, responding to both academic debates and urgent societal needs.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design: Survey Instruments

The DIALOGOS project adopted a mixed-methods design combining quantitative surveys, qualitative interviews, resource mapping, and a pilot training intervention. This design was chosen to triangulate findings and capture the complexity of NPIT practices in Spain, Italy, and Greece. Quantitative data provided broad patterns of language needs and service provision, while qualitative interviews illuminated the lived experiences of NPITs and service providers. Resource mapping offered a systematic overview of training tools available, and the pilot training course served as a testing ground for practical interventions. This design reflects an understanding that NPIT cannot be fully grasped through statistics alone, nor through isolated case studies. Rather, multiple complementary methods were needed to describe prevalence, practices, challenges, and possible solutions.

Two surveys were designed: one for service providers (healthcare staff, legal professionals, humanitarian workers, educators) and one for bilingual migrants with experience or potential involvement in interpreting and translation.

- The service provider survey contained 35 items, covering frequency of encounters with LLD speakers, availability and perceived quality of interpreting services, coping strategies when no professional interpreter was available, and attitudes toward NPITs. Both closed (Likert-scale, multiple-choice) and open-ended questions were included.

- The migrant survey contained 40 items, divided into sections on demographic information, linguistic repertoire, interpreting/translation experience, training needs, and motivations for participation.

Both surveys were piloted with 10 participants for clarity and cultural appropriateness before full deployment. They were made available online via Qualtrics and in paper format distributed by NGOs and community associations. To ensure accessibility, the migrant survey was translated into Spanish, Italian, Greek, Arabic, and Farsi, and participants could choose their preferred version.

3.2. Participants and Sampling

A total of 120 survey respondents participated: 65 service providers and 55 bilingual migrants. Sampling was purposive, focusing on individuals with direct experience of linguistic mediation in public services or of working with migrant populations.

Service providers included: 28 healthcare professionals (doctors, nurses, administrators); 14 legal professionals (judges, lawyers, police officers); 23 humanitarian workers, teachers, and social workers.

Bilingual migrants (NPITs) represented more than 15 LLDs, with Wolof, Yoruba, Somali, Farsi, and Armenian most frequent. Participants varied in age (18–54), gender (60% women, 40% men), and education level (from primary school to university). Many reported previous ad hoc interpreting experience in hospitals, schools, police stations, or asylum offices.

To recruit participants for our pilot course, the first step consisted of drawing up a list of relevant third-sector organisations that assisted migrants and refugees at various levels in Spain. A telephone survey of organisations supporting migrants and refugees at different operational levels within Spain was conducted to map T&I needs and capacities concerning LLD within these third-sector institutions, and to identify relevant candidates to participate in the pilot DIALOGOS training programme. This led to the identification and documentation of 74 relevant institutions. Based on the previous mapping, we targeted the organisations to assess their T&I needs, capacities and available training. The findings showed that 44% of the organisations did not mention specific requirements for LLD; moreover, we encountered significant challenges in our attempt to gather relevant information pertaining to human capacity and T&I training. Regarding human capacity, 44% of the surveyed organisations either lacked knowledge or preferred not to disclose information. In addition, 23% of the surveyed organisations reported employing in-house interpreters, while 16% opted for external T&I services; of note, 17% relied on volunteer support to address their T&I needs. The lack of available training data limited a comprehensive assessment. Individuals acting as communication facilitators, who are often volunteers, play a crucial role in bridging language gaps when professional interpreters or translators are unavailable.

An assessment of the T&I service needs for LLD was conducted to identify the specific languages that were most required by the targeted organisations. This evaluation resulted in the compilation of a comprehensive list outlining the top 20 LLD requiring T&I support within the Spanish context. Of these, 12 languages were identified as requiring critical support, namely Wolof, Bambara, Fula, Swahili, Hausa, Somali, Kinyarwanda, Soninke, Yoruba, Farsi, Armenian and Azari. In addition, speakers of other LLD such as Urdu, Pashto, Tachelhit, Amharic, Levantine Arabic, Ukrainian, Romanian and Albanian required significant T&I assistance. This compilation revealed distinctions across the Spanish, Italian and Greek contexts, which highlighted the need for a flexible approach when designing training courses to address the diverse linguistic requirements that are prevalent within each context and the development of training materials.

Table 1. Demographic profile of NPIT survey participants (data collected in 2023 from migrant survey respondents).

Country	N	Gender (F/M)	Age range	Most frequent LLDs
Spain	20	12 / 8	19–45	Wolof, Bambara, Yoruba, Farsi
Italy	18	10 / 8	21–50	Somali, Amharic, Urdu, Albanian
Greece	17	11 / 6	22–54	Farsi, Urdu, Pashto, Georgian

3.3. Interviews

To complement survey data, 24 semi-structured interviews were conducted: 12 with service providers and 12 with bilingual migrants. Interviews lasted 45–90 minutes and were conducted in the participant's preferred language (Spanish, Italian, Greek, or English). Interview guides covered personal trajectories, interpreting/translation experiences, ethical dilemmas, training needs, and institutional practices.

Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and where necessary translated into English. Analysis followed a thematic coding approach, combining deductive categories (ethics, training, language needs) with inductive themes emerging from the data (emotional burden, role confusion).

Illustrative bilingual quotes

> Spanish healthcare worker: *Siempre tenemos que depender de alguien de la comunidad para traducir, aunque no tenga formación* ('We always have to rely on someone from the community to interpret, even if they have no training').
>
> Greek humanitarian worker: Χρησιμοποιούμε μερικές φορές παιδιά για να μεταφράσουν, αλλά γνωρίζουμε ότι αυτό δεν είναι σωστό" ('Sometimes we use children to translate, but we know this is not right)'.
>
> Italian NPIT: *A volte usiamo i bambini per tradurre, anche se sappiamo che non è corretto* ('Sometimes we use children to translate, even if we know it is inappropriate').

These accounts confirm both the indispensability and the risks of NPIT.

3.4. Resource Mapping

The project systematically collected and classified 55 training resources relevant to NPITs and PSITs. Sources included academic institutions, NGOs, professional associations, and online platforms.

Inclusion criteria: resources designed for public service or community interpreting, available in digital or print form, and accessible to NPITs without advanced prior training.

Exclusion criteria: highly specialised resources requiring professional accreditation, or materials unrelated to PSIT (e.g., conference interpreting).

Resources were categorised into five competence areas: (1) Thematic (knowledge of healthcare, asylum, legal systems); (2) Terminological (glossaries, bilingual word lists); (3) Ethical (codes of conduct, case studies); (4) Intercultural (guidelines on cultural competence); (5) Strategic (practical strategies for turn-taking, role management).

3.5. Pilot Training Course and Limitations

A pilot training course was implemented in Madrid in March 2024 with 17 NPIT participants[1]. Eligibility required bilingual competence in an LLD and Spanish, and previous ad hoc interpreting experience.

The course consisted of 8 sessions (32 hours) delivered face-to-face, with modules on: Introduction to PSIT and NPIT roles; Interpreting modalities (bilateral, sight translation, chuchotage, consecutive); Translation tasks (short documents, forms), Ethical dilemmas and role boundaries; Intercultural communication and mediation; Self-care and stress management; Remote interpreting tools and digital resources; Professional expectations and community networking.

Evaluation combined: Pre/post self-assessment surveys, Trainer observation checklists and Reflective journals by participants. See the next illustrative feedback:

> Participant: *Ahora sé cómo gestionar un turno de palabra y cómo explicar mi papel* ('Now I know how to manage turn-taking and explain my role').
>
> Participant: *La terminología jurídica sigue siendo muy difícil, pero tengo estrategias para afrontarla* ('Legal terminology is still very difficult, but I now have strategies to deal with it').

Results showed increased confidence in ethics, note-taking, and role management, though technical terminology remained a challenge.

[1] The project obtained ethics approval from the coordinating institution. All participants provided informed consent, with safeguards for vulnerable migrants. Data were anonymised and pseudonyms assigned. Sensitive information (e.g., asylum status, personal histories) was excluded from transcripts to minimise risks. Researchers also recognised the emotional burden on NPITs who relived traumatic experiences while interpreting. Trainers incorporated debriefing sessions and stress-management activities into the pilot course as a form of ethical care.

The methodology, though robust, had limitations: The pilot course was delivered only in Spain due to logistical constraints, limiting cross-country comparability; The sample size (120 survey respondents, 24 interviewees) is not statistically representative; Long-term impact of training could not be measured within the project's timeframe.

Nevertheless, triangulation of methods, diversity of participants, and consistency with existing literature provide strong validity to the findings.

4. Results

This section presents the main findings from the three strands of the project.

4.1. Mapping LLD Needs

Survey and interview data revealed strong reliance on NPITs across all three countries. 82% of service providers reported significant communication challenges when working with LLD speakers. Only 23% had access to trained interpreters, while 64% relied on bilingual volunteers or community members.

Table 2. Languages of lesser diffusion most frequently reported in Spain, Italy, and Greece (data compiled from surveys and interviews conducted in 2023 across Spain, Italy, and Greece).

Country	Frequently Reported LLDs
Spain	Wolof, Bambara, Yoruba, Fula, Somali, Farsi
Italy	Somali, Amharic, Urdu, Farsi, Albanian
Greece	Farsi, Urdu, Pashto, Arabic dialects, Georgian

Qualitative data highlighted the human impact of these communication gaps. For example, a healthcare worker in Spain noted: *Siempre tenemos que llamar a algún vecino que hable un poco de español para ayudarnos* ('We always have to call a neighbour who speaks a little Spanish to help us'). An asylum officer in Italy reflected: *Senza interpreti adeguati, rischiamo di non capire le storie dei richiedenti asilo* ('Without proper interpreters, we risk not understanding asylum seekers' stories').

The surveys and interviews confirmed what the literature already hinted: NPITs are not exceptional cases, but the rule in many Southern European public services. Across Spain, Italy, and Greece, more than 80% of surveyed service providers reported having to work with users whose languages they did not understand. Only about a quarter of them had access to a trained interpreter; the rest depended on bilingual relatives, neighbours, or NGO staff.

4.2. Country differences

In Spain, languages such as Wolof, Bambara, and Yoruba were reported frequently in health centres in Madrid and Catalonia, where West African migration has a strong presence. Professionals described calling on "community leaders" to interpret.

In Italy, the most frequent LLDs were Somali, Amharic, and Urdu. Several interviewees explained that in asylum centres, "cultural mediators" were recruited, but their training was inconsistent.

In Greece, Farsi, Pashto, and Urdu dominated, reflecting migration from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran. NGOs in Athens and Lesbos often relied on young bilinguals to assist during medical consultations or police registration.

The following are illustrative quotes:

> Spanish nurse: *Siempre tenemos que llamar a algún vecino que hable un poco de español para ayudarnos* ('We always have to call a neighbour who speaks some Spanish to help us').
>
> Italian asylum officer: *Senza interpreti adeguati, rischiamo di non capire le storie dei richiedenti asilo* ('Without proper interpreters, we risk not understanding asylum seekers' stories').
>
> Greek NGO worker: Χωρίς φοιτητές *που* μιλούν φαρσί *ή πα*στού, δεν θα μπορούσαμε να συνεχίσουμε ('Without students who speak Farsi or Pashto, we could not carry on').

This evidence confirms that institutional reliance on NPITs is structural, particularly for languages with low migration visibility or few trained interpreters.

4.3. Resource Analysis

The mapping exercise identified 55 resources aimed at interpreters, NPITs, or related audiences. These included glossaries, handbooks, online courses, and institutional guidelines. However, the analysis revealed three main findings:

- Healthcare dominates: About half of the resources addressed medical communication, reflecting its urgency. By contrast, resources for police and judicial interpreting were fewer and often less accessible.

- LLDs are underrepresented: Many glossaries exist for Spanish–Arabic or Italian–Chinese, but almost none for Wolof, Bambara, or Pashto. One participant noted: *Cuando busco un glosario de mi lengua, no encuentro nada* ('When I look for a glossary in my language, I find nothing').

Ethics and interculturality receive attention, but resources are often too abstract for NPITs without prior training. Interviews confirmed the value of such materials, but NPITs stressed the lack of practical tools in their languages. One Somali-speaking participant explained: *Abbiamo usato un dizionario inglese–somalo trovato online, ma niente in italiano* (We used an English–Somali dictionary found online, but nothing in Italian).

The pilot course in Madrid provided the richest data for assessing the feasibility of qualification-based training for NPITs. In self-assessment surveys showed significant improvement in confidence across five areas: Role management, Ethical decision-making, Note-taking for consecutive interpreting, Basic translation of short texts; and Coping strategies for stress. Trainers observed clear progress during role-plays. For example, participants who initially interrupted frequently began to manage turn-taking more effectively:

> Participant: *Ahora sé cómo explicar que soy intérprete y cuál es mi papel* ('Now I know how to explain that I am the interpreter and what my role is').
>
> Participant: Η νομική ορολογία είναι ακόμη δύσκολη, *α*λλά έχω στρατηγικές για να την *α*ντιμετωπίσω ('Legal terminology is still difficult, but I now have strategies to face it').
>
> Trainer: *Participants became more aware of ethical dilemmas, particularly the temptation to add personal opinions.*

4.4. Challenges and Comparative Insights Across Sectors

Despite progress, three challenges persisted: terminologically, many struggled with legal or medical vocabulary in their LLDs, reflecting the absence of glossaries; as for digital access, some lacked laptops or internet connections, limiting their use of online resources. And as far as role boundaries is concerned, even after training, participants admitted it was difficult to refuse advocacy roles in their communities.

One of the most valuable outcomes of the study was the recognition that NPIT roles differ greatly across sectors:

i. Healthcare: NPITs are often expected to mediate sensitive information (diagnoses, treatment options). Errors here can be life-threatening.

ii. Asylum/legal: Accuracy is critical; credibility of applicants may hinge on interpretation. NPITs reported enormous pressure: *Tengo miedo de traducir mal y que la persona pierda su caso* ('I am afraid of interpreting wrongly and the person losing their case').

iii. Humanitarian: NPITs often multitask, interpreting while distributing food, managing accommodation, or teaching. This leads to role overload.

iv. Education: Bilingual students sometimes act as interpreters for parents, raising issues of child protection and confidentiality.

These comparisons highlight the need for sector-specific training modules rather than a one-size-fits-all approach.

4.5. Synthesis of Findings and Resource Analysis

Across all strands, five main themes emerge: (1) Indispensability: NPITs are a structural solution to LLD communication gaps; (2) Risks: Lack of training leads to breaches of ethics, inaccuracy, and emotional strain; (3) Training value: Even short qualification programmes yield tangible improvements; (4) Resource gaps: Existing tools under-serve LLDs and NPIT needs; (5) Sector variation: Context matters—asylum, healthcare, humanitarian, and education settings require tailored approaches.

The resource mapping identified 55 materials, which were categorised into competence areas. Healthcare and legal domains were relatively well represented, while humanitarian contexts and rare LLDs were underserved. Few materials explicitly targeted languages such as Wolof or Pashto.

Table 3. Classification of training resources collected (adapted from DIALOGOS resource database 2023).

Target Group	Examples of Resources
Trainees	Webinars, glossaries, phrasebooks
Healthcare providers	Multilingual terminology tools, strategy guidelines
Patients/families	Leaflets, guides on interpreting risks
Interpreters/trainers	Advanced modules, research-based materials
General public	Awareness-raising campaigns

Table 4. DIALOGOS training course competences.

Competence	Learning Outcomes	Examples/Resources
Interpreting & Translation	Provide interpreting and translation services	Role plays, glossaries
Thematic	Understand healthcare, asylum, legal systems	Case studies
Ethical	Apply PSIT code of ethics	Ethical role plays
Intercultural	Manage cultural differences	Mediation activities
Interpersonal	Turn-taking, role explanation	Simulations
Linguistic	Vocabulary in LLDs	Multilingual glossaries
Self-care	Coping strategies	Stress management activities
Technological	Use of digital tools	Remote interpreting platforms

Table 5. DIALOGOS course modules and topics.

Module	Topics
1. What is PSIT?	Roles, bilingualism vs. interpreting, intercultural competence, LLD
2. Who will I be helping?	Workplaces, mediation, ethics
3. What will I do?	Modalities, translation, remote interpreting, self-care
4. Knowledge for PSIT (Healthcare & Asylum)	Human rights, asylum laws, healthcare systems
5. Knowledge for PSIT (Police & Judicial)	Police/legal structures, courts, gender violence contexts
6. Professional expectations	Ethical dilemmas, strategies, networking

5. Discussion

The results of the DIALOGOS project confirm what many practitioners and researchers have long suspected: non-professional interpreters and translators (NPITs) are not an occasional stopgap but a structural feature of multilingual service provision in Southern Europe. In hospitals, asylum offices, schools, and humanitarian organisations, bilingual migrants and community members are the people who keep communication flowing when no professional is available. This reality is at once a resource and a risk.

The indispensability of NPITs cannot be overstated. Service providers across Spain, Italy, and Greece described situations in which, without the intervention of a neighbour, a volunteer, or a fellow migrant, basic communication would have broken down entirely. In health centres, a diagnosis could not be delivered; in asylum interviews, an applicant's story would not have been heard. In this sense, NPITs sustain the functioning of essential institutions.

At the same time, the risks identified echo decades of scholarship (Aguilar-Solano 2015, Hale 2014). Confidentiality is often compromised when patients must rely on relatives. Accuracy is endangered when interpreters lack training in specialised terminology. Ethical boundaries blur when NPITs find themselves advocating for a neighbour rather than neutrally interpreting. A Greek humanitarian worker captured this tension: Χρησιμοποιούμε συγγενείς *που* μερικές φορές δεν κρατούν τις *πληροφορίες* ιδιωτικές ('We use relatives who sometimes do not keep information private'). The discussion, therefore, is not whether NPITs should

exist — they clearly do and will continue to — but how their work can be better supported to reduce risks while recognising their value.

The DIALOGOS pilot course demonstrated that short-term qualification initiatives can produce tangible improvements. Participants became more confident in explaining their role, managing turn-taking, and recognising ethical dilemmas. Trainers observed visible progress even within a few sessions. This suggests that training does not need to be long or heavily academic to have an impact; even basic modules can change practice.

However, the limits were equally clear. Terminology in domains such as law or medicine remained a challenge, not because participants lacked ability, but because no resources exist in their languages. Role boundaries also remained fuzzy: many NPITs admitted they could not resist stepping into advocacy roles when interpreting for friends or community members. These limitations remind us that qualification is not a magic bullet. It mitigates risks, but it does not resolve the deeper structural issues.

As for professionalisation and long-term horizon, the distinction between qualification and professionalisation is well established in the literature (Antonini 2021, Monzó-Nebot & Wallace 2020). Our findings confirm that qualification is an effective short-term measure, but they also point to the need for professionalisation as a long-term horizon. Without accreditation systems, career pathways, and institutional recognition, NPITs remain in precarious positions. They are asked to perform crucial roles but without pay, training, or status. Here lies a paradox: NPITs are indispensable, yet invisible in policy. Institutions depend on them yet often treat them as if they should not exist. The challenge for scholars and policymakers is to bridge this gap: to acknowledge NPITs as a reality, provide qualification to improve practice, and simultaneously advocate for professionalisation where possible.

5.1. Ethics Revisited and Lessons from Other European Projects

Ethics emerged in our project not as an abstract principle but as a daily struggle. Participants described feeling torn between loyalty to their community and the demand for neutrality. A Spanish participant reflected: *Ahora entiendo por qué no debo añadir mis opiniones cuando interpreto* ('Now I understand why I should not add my opinions when interpreting'). This shift illustrates the power of training to raise ethical awareness. Yet it would be unrealistic to expect NPITs to fully embody professional codes that were designed for neutral outsiders. NPITs are insiders; they live in the same communities as those they interpret for. Monzó-Nebot & Wallace (2020) argue convincingly that ethics for NPITs must be reconceptualised, not imported wholesale from professional codes. Our findings support this view: ethics training should be grounded in the real dilemmas NPITs face, such as how to interpret bad news for a neighbour or how to maintain confidentiality in a small community.

Comparisons with other EU-funded projects help situate DIALOGOS in a broader landscape. CHILD-UP highlighted the role of children as mediators in schools, raising awareness of the risks of role inversion. REACTme developed training for emergency medical interpreting, providing resources that could be adapted for NPITs. TraiLLD focused on digital tools, pointing toward the future of online resource provision. FITISPos has long produced glossaries, modules, and research that bridge academia and practice.

What DIALOGOS adds is a focus on languages of lesser diffusion (LLDs) and on qualification specifically for NPITs in Mediterranean migration contexts. This focus fills a gap, since most previous projects either targeted major languages or assumed professional interpreters. By centring LLDs and NPITs, DIALOGOS acknowledges the realities of frontline communication.

5.2. Policy Implications: Digitalisation and Remote Interpreting

The findings carry important policy implications. EU and national migration strategies recognise language as key to integration yet often overlook the role of NPITs. Policymakers must accept that NPITs will continue to play a central role, especially in LLD contexts, and therefore require support.

Practical measures could include the following: Funding short-term qualification programmes for NPITs through NGOs and universities; Creating local registers of qualified NPITs to ensure institutions know whom to call; Supporting the development of glossaries and digital tools in LLDs; Offering modest remuneration to NPITs to acknowledge their contribution. These measures would not eliminate the need for professional interpreters, but they would recognise and stabilise the contribution of NPITs.

A further dimension that emerged is digitalisation. During the Covid-19 pandemic, many services shifted to remote interpreting platforms. NPITs expressed interest in using digital tools, but also frustration at their lack of access. Some did not own laptops or stable internet connections. This digital divide risks excluding NPITs from new modes of service delivery. Training must therefore include digital literacy and provide access to devices and platforms.

Projects like TraiLLD point to the potential of digital glossaries and online training. For NPITs, digital resources could reduce isolation, connect them with peers, and provide on-demand terminology. But these tools will only be effective if issues of access and affordability are addressed.

5.3. Broader Reflections

Taken together, the findings highlight the fragility and resilience of NPIT provision. Fragility, because reliance on untrained mediators creates risks for rights and safety. Resilience, because communities have developed their own mechanisms to cope, often at great personal cost.

For scholars, NPIT challenges us to rethink categories. The neat divide between "professional" and "non-professional" does not hold in practice. Many NPITs gain skills over time, blurring boundaries. Some move into professional pathways; others remain community interpreters. For policymakers, NPIT raises questions of justice: is it fair to rely on unpaid, untrained individuals for essential communication in healthcare or asylum procedures? For practitioners, NPIT demands pragmatism: when a bilingual neighbour is the only option, how can risks be minimised?

6. Conclusions

The DIALOGOS project began with a simple but urgent observation: in many hospitals, asylum offices, schools, and refugee centres across Southern Europe, communication happens thanks to ordinary bilinguals rather than trained professionals. These non-professional interpreters and translators (NPITs) are the backbone of multilingual public services in languages of lesser diffusion (LLDs). Without them, patients would remain unheard, asylum claims would stall, and humanitarian work would falter. Yet their work is largely invisible, unsupported, and unrecognised.

This article has presented the main results of the DIALOGOS project: a survey of service providers and migrants in Spain, Italy, and Greece; interviews that revealed lived experiences of NPITs; a systematic mapping of training resources; and a pilot course that tested the feasibility of short-term qualification. Together, these strands offer a picture that is both sobering and hopeful.

The sobering element is the evidence of risk: breaches of confidentiality, inaccuracies in interpreting, the emotional burden placed on NPITs, and the institutional reliance on people with no formal preparation. The hopeful element is the demonstration that training—even brief, carefully designed training—makes a difference. Participants left the pilot course more confident, more ethically aware, and better equipped with practical strategies. These two sides of the picture must be held together: NPITs are indispensable, but their contribution needs urgent support.

From a practical standpoint, the project shows that qualification initiatives are feasible, impactful, and scalable. They do not require long university degrees or extensive funding. What they require is recognition of NPITs as legitimate actors, and modest investment in structured training delivered in collaboration with NGOs, universities, and public institutions.

Practical measures include: Developing short modules (20–40 hours) that cover ethics, role boundaries, basic interpreting techniques, and self-care; Producing glossaries and resources in LLDs, ideally in digital formats that NPITs can access easily; Creating local registers of trained NPITs so that institutions know whom to call in emergencies; Providing small stipends or remuneration to NPITs, both to recognise their contribution and to reduce exploitation.

These are achievable steps. They will not eliminate the reliance on NPITs, but they will make it safer and more sustainable.

At the policy level, the findings highlight a blind spot. EU and national migration strategies routinely stress the importance of language, but they assume the availability of professional interpreters. For many LLDs, this assumption does not hold. Policymakers must therefore broaden their vision to include NPITs as part of the language-access ecosystem. This does not mean abandoning the goal of professionalisation. On the contrary, professional pathways should remain a horizon. But in the meantime, NPITs deserve recognition, support, and resources. Integrating qualification programmes into integration policies, funding NGOs to deliver training, and commissioning the development of LLD resources would represent significant steps forward.

For researchers, NPIT is not merely a marginal practice to be contrasted with "real" interpreting. It is a window into broader questions of migration, ethics, and communication. Studying NPIT forces us to reconsider assumptions about neutrality, professionalism, and linguistic justice. It reminds us that interpreting is not only a technical skill but also a social relation, embedded in communities, histories, and power dynamics.

This article contributes to that scholarly conversation by providing empirical evidence from three Mediterranean countries, by mapping resources, and by experimenting with training. It demonstrates that NPIT is not only a research object but also a site of intervention where academic work can make tangible differences.

Finally, future work should build on these foundations in several ways.

- Longitudinal studies: We need to know how NPIT training shapes practices months or years later. Do participants continue to use strategies learned? Do they become trainers themselves?
- Comparative pilots: Courses should be delivered in Italy and Greece, not only Spain, to capture contextual differences.
- Digital innovation: Online platforms, apps, and remote interpreting tools must be designed with NPITs in mind, ensuring accessibility in low-resource settings.
- Pathways to professionalisation: Research should explore how qualification initiatives can evolve into certification schemes and formal recognition.
- Global perspectives: Comparative studies with Latin America, Australia, and Canada would enrich our understanding of how NPITs operate in diverse migration contexts.

Perhaps the most striking lesson of DIALOGOS is the resilience of communities. Faced with linguistic exclusion, migrants and service providers do not wait for ideal solutions; they improvise, adapt, and rely on those who can bridge the gap. This resilience is admirable, but it should not be romanticised. It comes at a cost: stress for NPITs, risks for users, and ethical dilemmas for institutions.

The responsibility lies with us—researchers, trainers, policymakers—to lighten that burden. Recognising NPITs, offering them structured support, and embedding their contribution into policy frameworks are steps toward more just and inclusive societies. In the end, the goal is simple but profound: that everyone, regardless of the language they speak, can understand and be understood when it matters most.

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