

Standards & National Qualifications for Language Professionals

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For the last year the Languages Lead Body has been developing occupational standards. A substantial part of this work has focused on standards for professional translators and interpreters. Once agreed, the new standards will be used to produce nationally recognised qualifications. Tom Caple, who leads the consultancy team advising the Lead Body, explains what has been done so far.

The Languages Lead Body

The Languages Lead Body is a national forum working to establish standards for using Modern Foreign Languages at work. The Lead Body's membership represents a range of interests: employers, language professionals, professional and awarding bodies, education and training providers.

The Lead Body's work embraces both those whose use of foreign languages is their livelihood [such as interpreters and translators] and those who use a foreign language in the course of their work, whether in or outside the UK. So, there will be two products from this work:-

- Occupational standards for translators and interpreters
- Generic Language Standards that will apply to anyone using modern foreign languages in the course of their work: for examples, receptionists dealing with clients and customers from other countries; sales people promoting products or services in other countries; business people participating in meetings where a language other than English is the medium of communication.

This article concentrates on the first of these
- standards for professional language users.

The National Standards Programme

The Lead Body is funded by the Employment Department - Training, Enterprise and Education Directorate [ED-TEED]. TEED and the National Council for Vocational Qualifications [NCVQ] (SCOTVEC in Scotland), are charged by the government with implementing the National Standards Programme. The Programme has two broad aims:

- to establish agreed national performance standards which reflect the needs of a modern competitive economy;
- to create vocational qualifications based on these standards.

The intended outcome will be a UK labour force competent and qualified to meet the current and changing needs of employment.

Standards are developed by identifying precise specifications of the competence people need at work. This work is done by Industry Lead Bodies. The specifications are called occupational standards.

Standards are being set for every occupation in the UK economy:- from roof felters to accountants; from food processing to the performing arts; from agriculture to wire rope manufacture. For example, there are now occupational standards for managers; for trainers; for administrative and clerical staff; for estate agents; for retailers; and for wholesalers.

Developing Standards for Language Professionals

There are three stages in establishing nationally recognised occupational standards:

- Standards Development - the process of designing the standards;
- Standards Setting - the process of deciding the standards and publicising what they are;
- Standards Implementation - the process of encouraging employers to adopt the standards in their organisations and of encouraging awarding bodies to use the standards as the basis for designing qualifications.

The standards development programme has gone through the following steps:

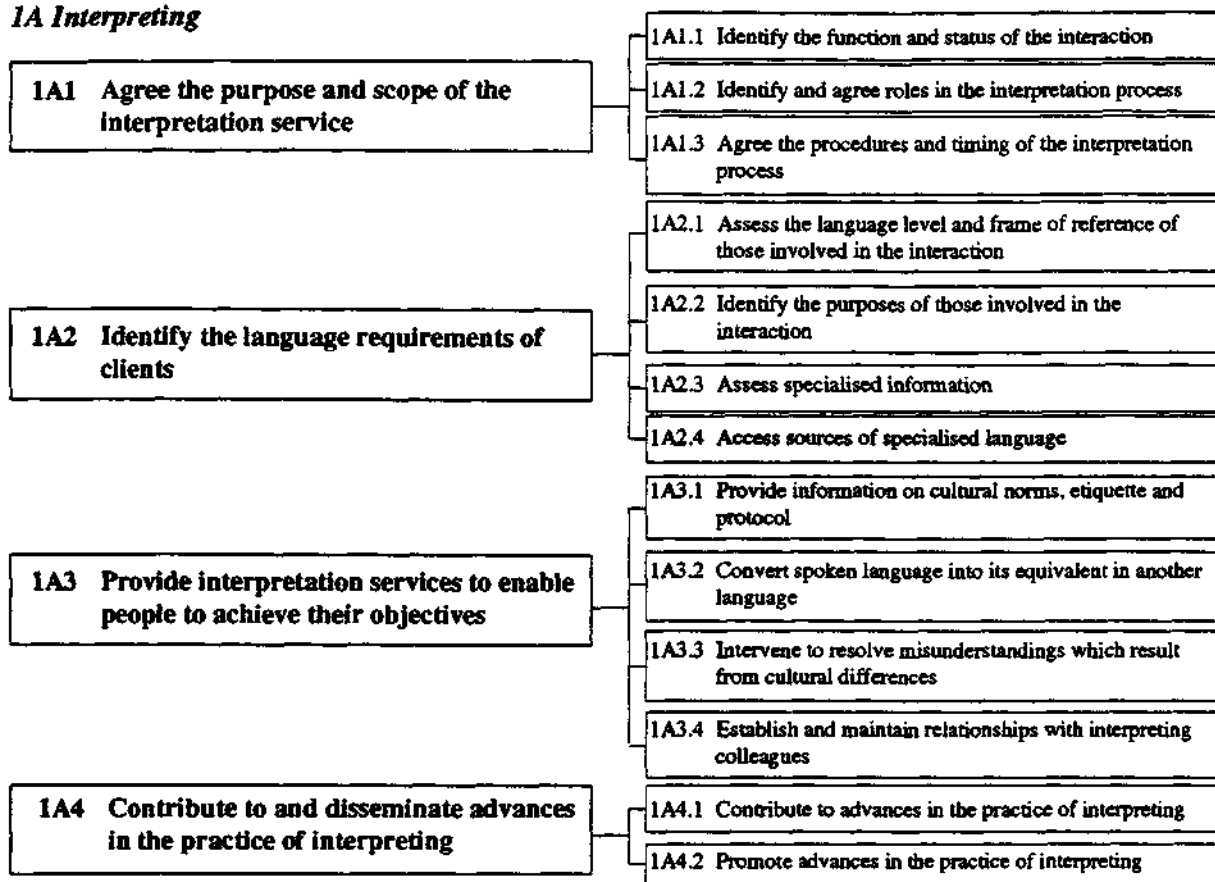
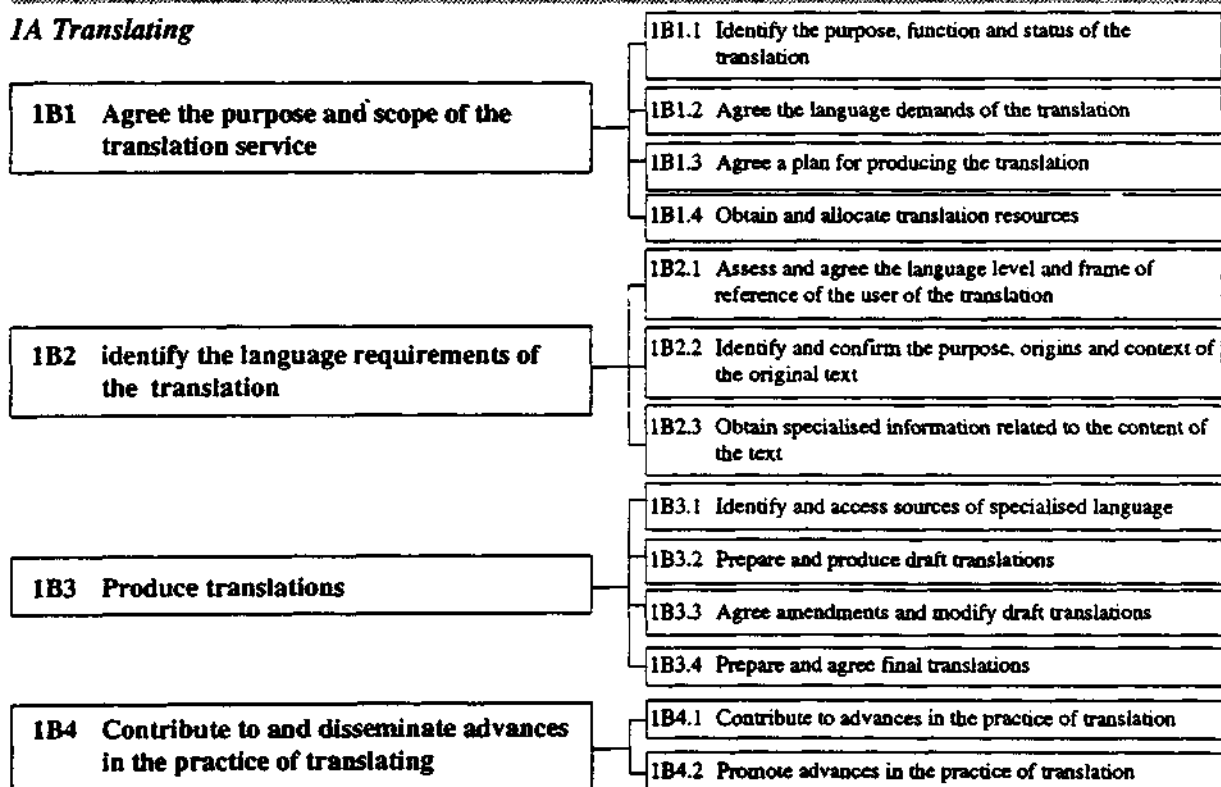
1A Interpreting**1A Translating**

Fig. 1 Occupational Standards: Language Professionals

- desk research and field work to clarify what is expected of interpreters and translators
- analysis of the results to produce draft standards
- evaluation of draft proposals by the Standards Group to identify improvements
- testing of proposals with language experts
- using the results to produce improved drafts of the specifications
- using the drafts to engage in a wide consultation with language professionals

Throughout this process the Standards Group has had as its prime concern the following:

- the standards must be applicable in all occupational contexts
- they must reflect accurately both current and emerging good practice
- differences between occupational roles must be genuine differences in what people are expected to achieve - not just "custom and practice" differences, or idiosyncrasies which do not affect the results people are expected to achieve.

Results so far

To date a comprehensive description of standards has been produced. Currently the development team is collecting further feedback from practitioners.

An outline of the occupational standards is shown in Figures 1A and 1B. The first shows the elements of competence in interpreting; the second shows elements of competence in translating. What follows explains in more detail the nature of the standards.

What is a Standard ?

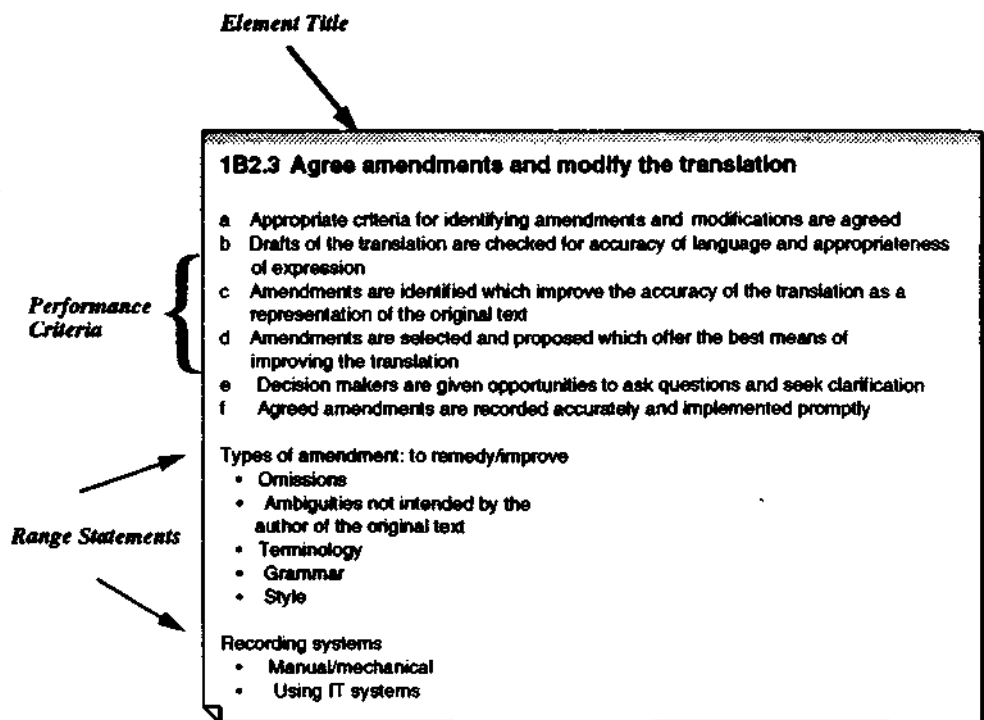
An occupational standard describes:

- what people are expected to achieve;
- what you would look for to judge that someone is achieving it;
- the typical instances in which a competent performance is expected.

Standards are not concerned with the detail of people's activities, but with the results people are expected to achieve. This broad approach to defining standards is deliberate. The intention is to put in place standards that will apply to the whole of an occupational area, not just to specific jobs and contexts.

Standards are technical specifications. They have a particular technical language and system of description which is intended to produce rigorous and coherent definitions of what a person in a given occupational area should be able to achieve. As Figure 2 shows, a standard consists of an element title, performance criteria and range statements:

- The *element title* describes the outcome an individual is expected to achieve.
- *Performance criteria* describe what you would look for to tell that someone is achieving what is defined in the element title. To be deemed competent, individuals have to meet *all* the criteria.
- Finally, standards have *range statements*. These describe the range of applications to which the standard will apply.



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Fig.2 Components of an Occupational Standard

Standards and Qualifications

The Lead Body's intention is that the occupational standards will be taken up as the basis for a new generation of nationally recognised qualifications which will carry with them a quality "kite mark" - the individual's competence to achieve the standards covered by the qualification. These qualifications are known as NVQs (SVQs in Scotland) or national Vocational Qualifications.

National Vocational Qualifications, are formed by grouping standards into Units of Competence. Units are the building blocks used to construct National Vocational Qualifications. Figure 4 shows how this works diagrammatically.

Assessment processes are designed [usually by Awarding Bodies] to produce valid and reliable evidence that the standards have been achieved. The assessment process is attached to the selected units to form the qualification.

To be recognised as having national status the qualification is submitted to the National Council for Vocational Qualifications. When proposals satisfy the Council's criteria, NCVQ will accredit it as a National Vocational Qualification or NVQ.

There are separate arrangements for Scotland, where the Scottish Vocational Educational Council [SCOTVEC] has dual responsibility for designing and accrediting Scottish Vocational Qualifications [SVQs]. SCOTVEC and NCVQ liaise closely with one another and with Lead Bodies to promote consistency in the national qualifications.

Standards and Training Programmes

The standards and associated assessment processes can be used to develop educational and training programmes. But they do not represent the content of such programmes. Rather they show what a trained person should be able to

achieve. Just as employers may use standards to decide what tasks they require of people at work, so the designers of learning can use the standards and assessment requirements to determine the content and structure of programmes.

Uses of Standards

Once finalised and endorsed by the Lead Body, the Standards will be available for use for a number of purposes and by different people. The initial priority will be to use them to design Units for incorporation into NVQs and SVQs.

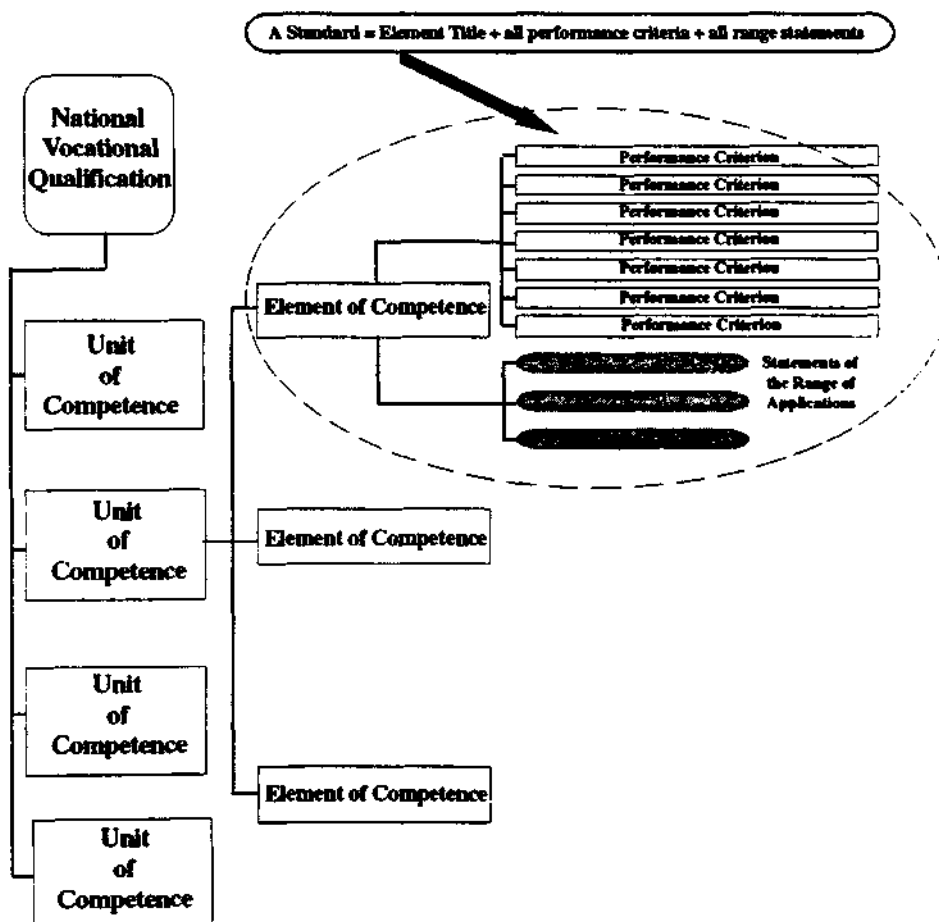


Fig. 4 Structure of a National Vocational Qualification

As indicated above, they can also be used to design learning programmes.

Standards can fulfil many other purposes.

Here are some:

- identifying/profiling the competence required to achieve organisational and business objectives
- selection for jobs, education and training programmes
- improving the quality/relevance of education and training programmes
- career planning
- monitoring skill supply shortages
- assuring the quality of services to clients and customers
- qualifying for contracts
- evaluating learning programmes
- providing goals for learners

As the standards come to be used in these and other ways, so too they will become part of organisational life. Strategically this is vital. Standards have value only to the extent that they "live" in what people do and contribute to the success of organisations, whether in private enterprise or public service.

There is perhaps one other immediate purpose these standards can fulfil - to provide language professionals with a coherent framework within which the practice of translating and interpreting can flourish, diversify and develop.