

Graciela Zozaya: A profile in professionalization

Rey Romero

Western Oregon University, University of Houston-Downtown

Abstract

Graciela Zozaya, an interpreter educator in Houston, Texas, personifies the evolution from a bilingual ad hoc translator and interpreter to a strong advocate for interpreter training and certification. Having more than four decades of experience in the industry, she has used her positions as manager for language services in the county's flagship healthcare provider and as strategic solutions executive for a Large Language Services Provider to promote interpreter training and certification. Furthermore, she has collaborated with local universities in continuing education certificate programs for interpreters and translators. Her beliefs and compromise in the professionalization of interpreters is also exemplified by her key leadership roles in several organizations, including the National Council on Interpreting in Health Care and the National

Board of Certification for Medical Interpreters, among others. Ms. Zozaya contributes her enthusiasm and commitment to professionalization to her friend and mentor Esther Diaz, a pioneer in establishing interpreter certification education programs in Texas.

Keywords: Interpreter training, interpreter certification, leadership, professionalization, mentorship

Professionalization has always been an issue in the interpreting profession. In Harris County, Texas, which encompasses Houston, the fourth largest and the most linguistically diverse large city in the United States, this issue has become a barrier for civil rights, legal representation, and access to adequate health services (McCann, 2025). To illustrate this problem, Harris County has a population of nearly 5 million inhabitants who speak 145 languages, but only 92 court-certified interpreters (Oxeden, 2024). In fact, both Harris County and nearby Fort Bend County have been sued by state and federal authorities for not providing interpreters or other means for language access to litigants with limited English proficiency (LEP) (Oxeden, 2024). In a recent meeting of the Houston Interpreters and Translators Association (HITA), the organization's president confided in the author the difficulty in convincing both seasoned and neophyte members about the benefits of certification, citing that about half of the members was not certified or licensed nor was in the process of doing so (A. Lacsamana, personal communication, February 22, 2025).

Although much research is needed into the barriers of professionalization, an integral part of this process is the availability of training to meet the demand for quality services and to control admission into the profession (Mikkelsen, 2004). In other words, without training opportunities, it would be difficult to increase the number of professional interpreters and meet quality standards for knowledge, ethics, and techniques that constitute professionalization.

For spoken language interpreters, the Certification Commission for Healthcare Interpreters (CCHI) and the National Board of Certification for Medical Interpreters (NBCMI) both require a medical interpreter training course of a minimum of 40 hours before registering to take the certification exam (CCHI, 2025a; NBCMI, 2016). In Texas, the Judicial Branch Certification Commission (JBCC) requires a pre-certification orientation course for court interpreters of at least 6 hours, and it must include the three modes of interpreting, ethics, criminal proceedings, and legal terminology (TXJBCC, 2025b). Still, despite the scant amount of minimum required training hours, these professional development programs are rare. For instance, CCHI lists 13 online and 5 onsite training programs for the certification of medical interpreters nationwide; none of the onsite programs are based in Houston (CCHI, 2025b); The Texas JBCC lists only 16 onsite and online programs for court interpreters, with seven based in Houston (TXJBCC, 2025a). Even though few in number, these training programs are critical for the professionalization of interpreters in Houston (and nationwide); and these efforts are led not just by large language services providers, but also by individuals who believe in the benefits of accreditation and who have gone beyond their call of duty to ensure training for certification is available. Actually, if we look closely at the Texas JBCC list, we will realize that a name appears either as an instructor or coordinator for five of the training courses in Houston: Graciela Zozaya.

A series of fortuitous events led Graciela Zozaya into the world of interpreter training. Before migrating to the United States, in Mexico City, she used her bilingual skills to translate documents for relatives and friends. Even though she had pursued a degree in social work with a specialization in child development, she became enamored with the translation process. After being in Houston for about a year, her company moved further north, and, unable to follow her job, she decided instead to hone her translation skills and obtain certification. This credential opened a different professional world to her, and soon she shifted to interpreting, as she was hired to do remote over-the-phone interpreting. At this moment, she realized the great need for language access in medical and legal environments, and she soon found herself interpreting in hospitals and courtrooms, eventually landing a job as a medical interpreter and patient advocate in Texas Children's Hospital, one of the top pediatric hospitals in Texas.

During this position, she became aware of the lack of training opportunities for medical interpreters, and she decided to act and train bilingual staff herself, thereby ensuring that someone was always available to provide language services. As she describes it, this is where she first got her feet wet into the training aspect of language access, something that she would continue to pursue in subsequent career moves. To illustrate, even though she worked as a translator for several years for an advertising company, she yearned to go back to healthcare interpreting. At the first opportunity, she applied for and obtained for a position as manager of language services for Harris Health System, the county's largest healthcare provider, where she continued facilitating training for her staff of over 50 medical interpreters. Because of her

experience and expertise, she was recruited as a strategic solutions executive for MasterWord, Houston's largest language services provider, her current position.

Graciela proudly states, "I have seen the language access industry from all perspectives." She has transitioned from a translator, interpreter, trainer, manager, and now promoting those services.

Notably, due to her experience in training, Graciela has also been a nexus between industry and academia, as she has participated as an instructor for interpreter training courses for several continuing education programs in local universities, including the University of Houston-Downtown, the University of Houston-Central, and Houston Community College.

Having more than four decades of experience with several roles, she has observed major changes in the language services industry. Graciela claims that the biggest change she has witnessed has been the professionalization of interpreting as a viable career opportunity. Two important factors have contributed to this professionalization. First, the newer generations of interpreters have been intentional in pursuing this career. Whereas before it was common to just land in this career by chance or as a side gig, young people are investing their time, energy, and education to become interpreters. Second, the awareness of the benefits of training has reached stakeholders, including hospitals and courts that now prefer to hire certified interpreters. This professionalization has created a demand for training to be affordable, accessible, and in different modalities, necessitating trainers to be ever more flexible and knowledgeable in adult education.

In fact, trying to adapt to new market demands has imparted new lessons for her professional development. The first is to understand that everybody is replaceable. This implies that she needs

to keep up to date with new skills, in order to stay current and marketable. Second, as a trainer, she reminds herself what is at stake when preparing the new generation of interpreters. For example, she understands that a lot of her students want to be medical interpreters because they want to help, but, unfortunately, this desire to help may blur professional boundaries and compromise an interpreter's neutrality and objectivity. This is why she considers her mission to instill a balance between empathy and sympathy. In all her training classes, she reminds students to detach from the emotions of that moment, for example through grounding or mindfulness exercises. The goal is to provide a more accurate and unbiased interpretation, which will ultimately benefit the patient and protect the hospital or courtroom from liability. She makes sure her students understand that the lack of impartiality will have negative consequences beyond that room where the interpreting session took place, and that the ability to remain unbiased is the main difference between a trained and untrained interpreter. Her conviction on impartiality is such that, when asked what one piece of advice she would give to neophytes in the profession, she stressed studying the code of ethics and professional standards of practice related to that field of interpreting. She emphasizes these guiding documents are there not only to ensure the professional conduct of an interpreter, but also to provide accurate and complete linguistic assistance to LEP consumers. If you cannot handle your emotions, you will not be able to help the most vulnerable.

In addition to her experience as a trainer, Graciela has been very active volunteering in leadership roles in professional organizations. Indeed, she sees her being elected to several boards of directors (National Council on Interpreting in Health Care, National Board of Certification for Medical Interpreters, Texas Association of Healthcare Interpreters and

Translators, and Houston Interpreters and Translators Association) as the biggest accomplishment in her career. Her motivation to volunteer in the leadership of these organizations stems from her sense that the interpreting profession needed more structuring, training, and professionalism. It came from her understanding that it takes a village to create positive change, and the best way to make a difference is to get involved in the frontlines, learn from peers, and advocate for policies that would benefit all stakeholders.

Graciela attributes her sense of commitment to the profession to her mentor and friend, Esther Diaz, a prolific interpreter and translator trainer and a pioneer of professional organizations in Texas, based out of Austin. Graciela recounts that Esther became her mentor when she was trying to get more involved in translation, attending every ATA Conference. Being both from Texas, Esther eventually reached out to her and, being aware of each other's work, suggested to Graciela to get involved in the National Council. Graciela hesitated at first, "I could never match Esther's dedication, energy, and preparation, but she gave me the confidence I needed and said, 'Yes, you can.'" Esther became available to answer questions, explaining what, why, and how she was doing her many training projects. Graciela learned by observing her political moves, her courses, her leadership, and then implementing that knowledge in her own special way.

Perhaps influenced by Esther, Graciela pinpoints two important characteristics that every leader in the interpreting profession should have. First, a leader should have a clear goal in mind and be able to communicate this to all stakeholders, which are not limited to LEP patients, but must also include their relatives, healthcare providers, hospital administrators, and other staff. A leader must also listen to feedback, even if it is not always positive. To this, Graciela adds a second

characteristic, which is being aware of every stakeholder's role, their contributions, and their needs. She emphasizes that one way of gaining a deeper awareness of these roles is to get involved in as many aspects of the interpreting experience as possible. Even if you are a leader, you must observe who you supervise, and understand their expectations and demands, especially if they need to deal with issues that may affect their job like vicarious trauma. Graciela claims that participating in the process and conversing with stakeholders solidifies your position as you are perceived as a true leader, and not just mere management. Communication and awareness lead to a better working environment, identifying potential areas of conflict and growth, and overall improved outcomes for the most vulnerable.

For those who want to become leaders in the profession, Graciela provides three pieces of advice: volunteer in interpreter organizations, study trends in the industry, and obtain as much training as you can, not just in interpreting skills, but also in related areas such as management, leadership, and technology. This is the advice that she herself follows to stay relevant in her many roles and responsibilities, as she herself is currently taking a course on project management to complement her new role as strategic solutions executive in MasterWord.

Undoubtedly due to her experience as a mentee of Esther Diaz, Graciela believes that the interpreting profession in Houston would benefit greatly from having a mentorship program, perhaps done through a local organization like the Texas Association of Healthcare Interpreters and Translators (TAHIT) or the Houston Interpreters and Translators Association (HITA). However, she warns that interpreters live very busy lives, and therefore the program should be formal and well-structured, meeting perhaps once a month or so, to hold both mentors and

mentees accountable and to create a sense of community and support between more experienced interpreters and neophytes in the profession. As someone who has benefited from Graciela's training and mentorship, this author thinks this is a great opportunity to contribute to the professionalization of interpreting in Houston. The author will suggest this idea in the next HITA meeting. If elected to spearhead this project, the author knows that Graciela's wisdom is only a phone call away!

About the Author

Rey Romero is Professor of Spanish Translation & Linguistics at the University of Houston-Downtown since 2010, where he teaches undergraduate courses on translation, interpreting, and Spanish for the Professions. He has a PhD in Spanish Linguistics from Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., a MA in Public Health from the University of Texas-Health Sciences Center in Houston, and a MA in Translation from Kent State University. He is currently a student at Western Oregon University's MA in Interpreting Studies (Teaching Track). His research interests in the field of interpreter include heritage speakers in the interpreting classroom and the teaching of professional ethics.

References

Certification Commission for Healthcare Interpreters (CCHI). (2025a). *Interpreter training*.

<https://cchicertification.org/certifications/eligibility/interpreter-training/>

Certification Commission for Healthcare Interpreters (CCHI). (2025b). *Prerequisite programs*.

<https://cchicertification.org/prerequisite-programs/online/>

McCann, A. (2025, February 26). Most diverse cities in the United States. *WalletHub*.

<https://wallethub.com/edu/most-diverse-cities/12690>

Mikkelsen, H. (2004, October 25). The professionalization of community interpreting. *AIIC*.

https://aiic.org/document/92/AIICBlog_Oct2004_MIKKELSON_Community_interpreting_EN.pdf

National Board of Certification for Medical Interpreters (NBCMI). (2016). *Prerequisites for Spanish*. <https://www.certifiedmedicalinterpreters.org/prerequisites-spanish>

Oxeden, M. (2024, June 18). Interpreter cost, availability in Harris civil courts pose barrier for non-English speakers. *HoustonLanding*. <https://houstonlanding.org/interpreter-cost-availability-in-harris-civil-courts-pose-barrier-for-non-english-speakers/>

Texas Judicial Branch Certification Commission (TXJBCC). (2025a, April 15). *Licensed court Interpreters, approved orientation courses*. <https://www.txcourts.gov/jbcc/licensed-court-interpreters/initial-licensure/approved-orientation-courses/>

Texas Judicial Branch Certification Commission (TXJBCC). (2025b, March 12). *Licensed court interpreters, continuing education & orientation*. <https://www.txcourts.gov/jbcc/licensed-court-interpreters/continuing-education-orientation/>