



## The interpreter education in context: interview with Professor Xiangdong Li

### A formação de intérpretes em contexto: entrevista com o Professor Xiangdong Li

*Interviewee: Professor Xiangdong LI\** 

*Interviewer: Marileide Dias ESQUEDA\*\** 

*Interviewer: Nycolas Domingos MOURA\*\*\** 

**ABSTRACT:** In this interview, obtained through email exchange in 2026, Xiangdong Li (Xi'an International Studies University) discusses core themes within Interpreting Studies. Drawing on his extensive teaching and research background, the expert analyzes interpreters' cognitive processing, modes of interpreting, and pedagogical challenges, while evaluating the impact of various methodologies on both instruction and research.

**Keywords:** Xiangdong Li. Interpreting Studies. Interpreter Education.

**RESUMO:** Nesta entrevista, obtida por trocas de *e-mails* in 2026, Xiangdong Li (Xi'an International Studies University) discute temas centrais dos Estudos da Interpretação. Apoiado em sua trajetória docente e investigativa, o especialista analisa o processamento cognitivo dos intérpretes, as modalidades de interpretação e os desafios pedagógicos da área, avaliando o impacto de diferentes metodologias no ensino e na pesquisa.

**Palavras-chave:** Xiangdong Li. Estudos da Interpretação. Formação de Intérpretes.

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\* Full Professor at the Xi'an International Studies University (XISU). [xiangdong813@gmail.com](mailto:xiangdong813@gmail.com)

\*\* PhD in Applied Linguistics to Translation (Unicamp). Full Professor at the Universidade Federal de Uberlândia (UFU). [marileide.esqueda@ufu.br](mailto:marileide.esqueda@ufu.br)

\*\*\* Master's Candidate in the Graduate Program in Linguistics at the Universidade Federal de Uberlândia (UFU). [nycolasmoura41@gmail.com](mailto:nycolasmoura41@gmail.com)

## 1 About the interviewee

Xiangdong Li (李向东) is a Professor of Translation and Interpreting Studies at the Xi'an International Studies University. He joined the School of Translation Studies in 2008 and, since then, has been teaching T&I courses such as sight translation and community interpreting, and supervising students' translation projects. His areas of research lie in translation and interpreting pedagogy, curriculum design and assessment, and academic translation. His most recent research articles appear in international T&I journals such as *Across Languages and Cultures*, *Perspectives*, *Babel*, *The Interpreter and Translator Trainer*, *The Interpreters' Newsletter*, and *RESLA*. He was awarded several times for teaching and research excellence by the university and the provincial government. He also serves as a reviewer for international journals such as *Perspectives*, *Translation Spaces*, *LANS-TTS*, *Target*, and *Meta*.

## 2 The Interview

1. **Esqueda and Moura:** Professor Xiangdong Li, it is a great honor to feature you in this issue of *Domínios de Lingu@gem*. Could you begin by sharing the ways in which your experience as a practitioner, researcher, and educator has influenced your understanding of the cognitive and pedagogical aspects of interpreting?

### Professor Xiangdong Li:

Thank you for your invitation. It is a pleasure to engage in this dialogue with *Domínios de Lingu@gem*. My experience as a practitioner, educator, and researcher has offered me multiple lenses to see interpreting as a complex activity. Each one has shaped my understanding of the cognitive and pedagogical aspects of interpreting.

As a practitioner in my earlier years, I experienced the cognitive and psychological pressures of interpreting. One must not only achieve rapid information processing and mediation between languages but also manage stress and maintain

social connections with clients. In community settings, one also works as a cultural mediator to bridge the differences between the two parties involved. This practical immersion taught me that interpreting is far more than a linguistic transaction; it is a situated, social, and cognitively taxing act of communication. This constitutes my personal understanding of interpreting competences, which informs my future teaching practice.

Transitioning into an instructor, I face the challenge of establishing a competence construct and incorporating it into curriculum design. My teaching experience, particularly with courses like sight translation, community interpreting, and consecutive interpreting, helps me understand the gaps between students' current skills and the target competences required in professional settings. This leads me to keep refining my construct of the competences and exploring how to update them in the next round of instructional design. The goal is always to bridge the gap between the classroom and the market. I resort to the literature for references, for example, *The Interpreters' Newsletter*, *Interpreting*, and the book volumes published by John Benjamins. When those references cannot help or when I have problems that are unique to my educational context, I conduct research.

As a researcher, I seek to propose innovative ideas of pedagogical design or solve problems in my teaching context. My areas of interest include various aspects of curriculum design, for example, market needs analysis, conceptualization of teaching content, learning needs analysis, goals and objectives, teaching and learning beliefs, syllabus design and analysis, material development, instructional effect, assessment, course evaluation, and so on. By engaging with theories like social constructivism and situated learning, I aim to build an evidence-based framework for interpreter education. Research is a way to refine pedagogy, ensuring that my teaching methods are not only practical but also theoretically sound and responsive to students' needs and industry evolution.

Together, these perspectives have convinced me that effective interpreter education must be iterative and integrative, constantly moving between theory, practice, and reflection to prepare students for the realities of the profession.

- 2. Esqueda and Moura:** Thank you, Professor Li, for this insightful introduction of your experiences. As a Professor at the Xi'an International Studies University (XISU)—one of China's earliest and most significant hubs for foreign language education—could you briefly describe the current landscape of Translation and Interpreting Studies there at the School of Translation Studies?

**Professor Xiangdong Li:**

Thank you for this question. Xi'an International Studies University (XISU) has indeed played a pioneering role in China's modern translation and interpreting education. As one of the earliest universities to offer dedicated degrees in Translation and Interpreting (T&I) Studies, the School of Translation Studies, XISU, has evolved into a hub that integrates education, research, and professional service.

We offer T&I degrees at three levels. At the undergraduate level, we offer a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Translation and Interpreting, which aims to help students lay a foundation in bilingualism, cross-cultural communication, and introductory T&I skills. The focus is on building a solid linguistic and cognitive base. At the postgraduate level, we have two degrees: the Master of Arts Degree in Translation and Interpreting and the Master of Translation and Interpreting (MTI). The MTI program, launched to cultivate industry-ready professionals, emphasizes specialized training. At the doctoral level (DTI), our mission shifts towards cultivating scholar-practitioners who can solve complex, real-world problems in the industry and education through research.

Research at the School is vigorous and increasingly interdisciplinary. Faculty and doctoral students are exploring areas not only within pedagogy and assessment,

but also in corpus-based translation studies, audiovisual translation, interpreting cognition, and the sociolinguistics of translation.

Beyond the classroom, we are deeply engaged with the community. Faculty and students regularly undertake translation and interpreting projects that serve the local government and enterprises.

So far, balancing the scholarly pursuit of Translation Studies as an academic discipline with the market-driven demands for practical skills has been a concern. How to uphold intellectual rigor and theoretical depth while ensuring that our graduates possess the practical competences required by employers? This is what keeps our curriculum and research dynamic.

- 3. Esqueda and Moura:** In your recent work, “Updating the Training Subbranch of the Translation Studies Map” (*Trans. Revista de Traductología*, 2025), you provide a comprehensive visualization of the ‘applied’ branch of the discipline. Given this framework, how do you characterize the interplay between the education of translators and interpreters? Specifically, do you perceive the various sub-elements you’ve mapped—such as ‘curriculum development and assessment’ or ‘market and graduation requirements’—as following distinct pedagogical paths for each role, or are they integrated components of a singular, unified training philosophy?

**Professor Xiangdong Li:**

My recent work, which updated the training subbranch of the Translation Studies map, aims to describe the current branch of translator and interpreter (T&I) education on the basis of a descriptive analysis of the current literature. The updated branch, with its five thematic clusters, provides a conceptual framework applicable to both translator and interpreter education. It presents a research roadmap in both translator and interpreter education, though there might be an imbalance between translator and interpreter training research and among their different sub-branches.

Since translator and interpreter trainers work within a similar contextual landscape, all branches and their sub-branches in the map apply to research in both translator and interpreter education. However, there are differences in their focal points. For instance, interpreter trainers publish more research on themes like market needs analysis, learner traits, and admission/recruitment. This aligns with the intense, immediate cognitive and performance pressures of interpreting, which demands careful selection of candidates with certain aptitudes (e.g., stress tolerance, quick decision-making) and a curriculum reflecting the ever-changing market needs. By contrast, translation pedagogy research focuses on areas like syllabus/curriculum design and analysis and T&I as a means to education. This may reflect the more varied and textual nature of specialized areas (legal, literary, technical, etc.) that require different curricular structures, as well as the historical use of translation as a tool for language teaching.

There is an imbalance between research on Curriculum Development and Assessment (CDA) and on market and graduation. Curriculum Development and Assessment (CDA) (e.g., needs analysis, instructional design, assessment, etc.) are central to the training of language service professionals. They represent a process to help learners move from novices to experts. By contrast, market and graduation (research training, pre-service preparation, certification, and on-the-job training) are concerned more with preparing graduates for professional reality and lifelong learning. CDA themes attract more attention because data on classroom instruction, materials, and assessment are more accessible to instructor-researchers. Themes like certification, internship outcomes, or on-the-job training often require longitudinal data or access to professional networks that are hardly available.

4. **Esqueda and Moura:** In your article “Interpreting students’ perceptions of interpreter status, market order, and educational support and their commitment to the profession: a survey in China” (*Onomázein*, 2024), you and

Yanbo Chai highlight a concerning ‘mismatch’ between the rigorous expertise required for interpreting and the external realities of low social recognition and inadequate income. You specifically note that while students are often drawn to the field by ‘internal factors’ like interest, it is the ‘external environment’ — such as a lack of control over market entry — that leads them to reject the profession. In the Brazilian context, where the ‘common sense’ view often erroneously equates simple bilingualism with professional competence, this mismatch is particularly visible. Linking these findings to your ‘updated training subbranch in the TS map’ (2025), how can training institutions use ‘curricular development’ or ‘user/client education’ to move beyond what the author Ruokonen (2016)<sup>1</sup> you cited calls ‘underlying naïveté’ and better prepare students to navigate a market that may not yet fully recognize their professional status?

**Professor Xiangdong Li:**

This question touches upon a critical challenge in emerging translation and interpreting markets. The mismatch between the high expertise required and the low external recognition is a paradox that undermines the professionalization of interpreting and affects student commitment. Our survey in China showed that, while students are initially drawn by internal motivators such as interest and the intellectual challenge, they are often driven away by external factors: disorderly market entry, inadequate income, low social recognition, and a lack of institutional support. Linking this to the updated training subbranch in the Translation Studies map, I believe training institutions can focus on two issues to address this: Curriculum Development and Assessment (CDA) and user/client education.

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<sup>1</sup> RUOKONEN, M. Realistic but not pessimistic: Finnish translation students’ perceptions of translator status. *The Journal of Specialised Translation*, v. 25, p. 188-212, 2016.

First, we must move beyond a skill-based approach and integrate what I call professional realism into programs. This means designing curricula that address the realities of the market. We need to ensure that simulations and internships expose students to real-world client interactions and market unpredictability. Mock conferences, as my earlier research indicates, can boost motivation; they should also include debriefings on professional ethics. We may also embed context/policy analysis into courses. Students not only learn how to interpret, but also examine the socio-economic, legal, and policy frameworks that shape the profession in the region and understand the forces that regulate market entry. Another thing to do is co-development of curricula with professional associations and employers, for example, modules on professional branding and entrepreneurship. If employers do not distinguish between translation degrees and language majors, we need to produce graduates who can demonstrate and articulate their added value. Similarly, alumni and associations can be a resource. Graduates working in the field are ambassadors. We can organize forums where alumni discuss market realities with trainees, bridging the gap between classroom idealism and professional realism.

Second, institutions may engage in user/client education. This is an outreach-oriented theme in the updated TS map that addresses the root of low recognition. If the market (clients, employers, policymakers, etc.) does not understand the profession, no curricular reform alone will elevate interpreters' status. Therefore, programs should initiate and educate their user groups. Programs may develop short courses, workshops, public lectures, or short-form videos for clients, corporate managers, and government agencies, explaining the cognitive demands of interpreting and the risks of using non-professionals.

- 5. Esqueda and Moura:** What would constitute an ideal pedagogical trajectory for an interpreter—from initial extracurricular engagement through to undergraduate education and/or postgraduate specialization? In addition,

regarding the professional development of trainers, what essential knowledge of instructional methodologies should they possess? We ask this question because it seems that in your recent work, “Updating the Training Subbranch of the Translation Studies Map” (*Trans. Revista de Traductología*, 2025), in table 1, the cluster related to ‘teachers’ is notably scarce compared to curriculum development or student traits, for instance.

**Professor Xiangdong Li:**

I must first admit that there is no universally agreed-upon ideal path; instead, effective trajectories are context-specific and even instructor-specific. Two pedagogical paradigms in the literature are the language pair-independent approach and the language pair-dependent approach. The former, based on the concept of de-verbalization proposed by the Paris School, advocates training with no emphasis on language-specific issues (e.g., the teaching of interpreting skills to students of different working languages in the same classroom). The latter emphasizes the teaching of language pair-specific strategies (e.g., the teaching of interpreting skills to students according to their language pairs). Another two paradigms are the real-life approach and the sub-skill approach. While the former uses authentic materials and conditions (e.g., mock conferences), the latter decomposes interpreting into skills, and each skill is taught separately before interpreting is introduced. Training institutions may combine and tailor different approaches into their instructional practice, depending on the teaching beliefs of curriculum developers and instructors. A trajectory may begin with a foundation in sub-skills before progressing to language-specific and authentic activities.

Indeed, the relative scarcity of research on trainer development in the updated TS map reflects a gap that deserves our attention. The knowledge that trainers are supposed to possess goes beyond proficiency in interpreting. First, trainers should have pedagogical content knowledge, an understanding of how to transform their

expert knowledge into learnable components. This includes mastery of both instructional paradigms: knowing when to employ a sub-skill approach to isolate and exercise specific skills and knowing when to design holistic, realistic tasks to foster strategic agility and professionalism. Other knowledge concerning CDA is also a must so that trainers can write teaching outcomes, formulate course syllabi, select and sequence materials, and design formative and summative assessments. It would also benefit teaching if they could diagnose learner needs and traits and adapt their instruction accordingly. This is particularly important given the fact that trainees may come from varied linguistic, cultural, and educational backgrounds.

Second, trainers need theoretical knowledge of interpreting. Although teaching interpreting theories, principles and concepts to students is not the ultimate goal, trainers need to use them as a theoretical lens to explain why interpreting is cognitively taxing, why problems occur, why a given strategy might undermine communication, and why an alternative strategy may contribute to effective communication. The professional development of trainers is a continuous process. It involves not only initial training in pedagogy but also opportunities for peer observation, mentoring, and engagement with educational research. This area definitely calls for more systematic inquiries.

6. **Esqueda and Moura:** Given the cognitive complexity and the high level of linguistic mastery required for interpreting, do you believe it is pedagogically viable to maintain a dedicated interpreter education program at the undergraduate level? Based on your work 'Mapping the Research Landscape of Interpreter and Translator Education' (*Routledge*, 2025), do you consider such education (or training) more suited to specialized (post)graduate levels?

**Professor Xiangdong Li:**

I believe that establishing a dedicated interpreter education program at the undergraduate level is not pedagogically viable. This position is rooted in the cognitive-linguistic demands of the task, the developmental stage of undergraduate students, and the distinct purposes of undergraduate versus postgraduate education. Specialized interpreter training is more suited to the postgraduate level.

The primary reason lies in the cognitive complexity and linguistic proficiency required in interpreting. Interpreting is performed under severe time pressure and requires simultaneous multi-tasking. The competence construct includes near-native linguistic competence in working languages, psychological resilience, transfer competence, strategic decision-making, cross-cultural awareness, and thematic knowledge. For instance, linguistic competence is very demanding in interpreting. Listening for interpreting demands a deep, meaning-based approach to speech processing. Interpreters need to extract the main ideas, identify and organize the main and secondary points into chunks, and retain them for retrieval and reformulation. These cognitive operations go beyond regular language and communication skills.

Undergraduate students are usually not ready in those competences. For example, a common weakness among undergraduates is weak listening proficiency. Many students, even those with good grammatical knowledge and vocabulary, process input (B language) speeches through a text-driven approach, which might be attributed to the way they have learned their B languages (grammar translation approach, reliance on textbooks instead of authentic contexts, etc.). Such a weakness may lead them to use a word-for-word approach in interpreting. This deficiency makes the introduction of interpreting-specific skills to undergraduates (note-taking, multi-tasking, information delivery, etc.) premature.

Undergraduate and postgraduate education serve different purposes. In countries with T&I programs at both BA and MA levels, such as Spain, South Korea, and China, we can observe a clear division. The Bachelor of Arts in Translation and

Interpreting is designed as a general education program. It provides a broad foundation in cross-cultural studies, translation principles, and general language enhancement. Its goal is to produce versatile graduates with enhanced bilingual and bicultural competence, who may proceed to various language-related fields, including but not exclusively T&I studies. In contrast, the Master's level (MA or MTI) is explicitly designed for the education of professionals. This postgraduate level is where the authentic and language-pair-specific training paradigms are appropriate to bridge the gap between skilled language users and emerging professional interpreters.

7. **Esqueda and Moura:** It is widely acknowledged that specialized teaching materials in Translation and Interpreting are often scarce or insufficiently adaptable to the varying credit hours and specific objectives of different university curricula. For instance, at the Universidade Federal de Uberlândia, our program currently offers a single 60-hour foundational course covering interpreting modalities and core theories. Reflecting on your study, “Simulation Dominated Approach *versus* Video Dominated Approach in Teaching Consecutive Interpreting to Undergraduates” (Onomázein, 2019), how do you evaluate the evolution of these teaching methods over the last few years? Furthermore, do you believe that condensed versions of the Simulation-Dominated Instruction (SDI) or video-based approaches can be effectively integrated into such shorter courses, or should a single-semester course focus primarily on the theory and history of interpreting?

**Professor Xiangdong Li:**

Simulation-Dominated Instruction (SDI) and Video-Dominated Instruction (VDI) are not competing methodologies; instead, they are complementary in interpreter training. We can integrate both in training based on students' progression and curricular objectives. VDI is less authentic and contextualized, but it is cost-

effective and can be diversified. It is effective in the early stages to help students build foundational skills. SDI, by contrast, is more expensive. Its strength lies in authenticity. It is crucial for contextualized, experiential learning, particularly in developing non-verbal competences among advanced students. The decision on how to balance the two approaches should be determined by the specific teaching objectives. For example, a short course might begin with VDI-dominated sessions to build basic competences and confidence, and then incorporate SDI to contextualize students' learning towards the end of the course. This combination ensures that students gain basic skills and experience the professionalism of interpreting, making the course more engaging and professionally relevant.

In a condensed foundational course, such as a 60-hour semester, I believe a blended approach is not only feasible but necessary. A course focusing solely on theory would miss the opportunity to demonstrate interpreting as a sense-based, situated practice. VDI offers a cost-effective and logistically manageable way to introduce fundamental skills like analytical listening and note-taking. It helps students grasp essential concepts and techniques within limited contact hours. However, excluding simulation would ignore a critical dimension of interpreter education. SDI activities, such as short role-plays or mock scenarios, can be integrated toward the end of the course or as capstone exercises. These simulations need not be lengthy; brief, well-designed exercises can highlight the interpreter's role in real-life communication. This prepares students for internships, bridging the gap between classroom experience and professional reality.

- 8. Esqueda and Moura:** Following the conclusions of your aforementioned study, have you been able to fully integrate the Simulation-Dominated Instruction (SDI) framework into your own curriculum? How has the transition from an experimental model to a consistent classroom practice evolved in recent years?

**Professor Xiangdong Li:**

In our curriculum, Video-Dominated Instruction (VDI) are the dominant format in most foundation courses. Simulation-Dominated Instruction (SDI) has also been an integral part, particularly in advanced interpreting courses. SDI is deployed after core skills are acquired through VDI. The complementary use of VDI and SDI aligns curriculum design with resource realities and the goal of cultivating interpreter competences, bridging the gap between controlled exercises in classrooms and the unpredictable nature of professional interpreting in realistic settings. At the undergraduate level, SDI is primarily implemented as a capstone or end-of-term activity in third-year consecutive or conference interpreting courses. We used to invite native speakers to simulate realistic scenarios, but for logistical and financial sustainability, we have adapted it by having instructors and advanced students role-play as speakers. This adjustment retains the authentic dynamics essential for practicing non-verbal elements, such as eye contact, voice projection, and managing live speaker-audience presence, while remaining feasible within regular teaching constraints. At the MTI level, SDI has become a more frequent and embedded instructional method across various courses. Instructors regularly incorporate simulated scenarios, such as mock conferences or mediated dialogues, into their teaching schedule. Again, cost and accessibility considerations mean that guest speakers are not frequently used; instead, teachers and students collaboratively create interpreting environments. This indicates a shift toward situated learning, ensuring that advanced trainees can develop professionalism in simulated settings.

- 9. Esqueda and Moura:** Given the evolving landscape of our field, how do you perceive the relationship between Sign Language Interpreting pedagogy and the broader framework of Translation and Interpreting Studies (TIS)? Do you believe that the pedagogical developments in spoken language interpreting should be more closely integrated with those of signed languages?

**Professor Xiangdong Li:**

I think that Sign Language Interpreting (SLI) pedagogy falls into the broader framework of Translation and Interpreting Studies (TIS). Interpreter educators in both spoken and sign language domains are supposed to possess three categories of knowledge: knowledge of interpreting as a cognitive and communicative process, knowledge about the teaching and learning of interpreting, and general pedagogical knowledge. Didactic principles, such as curriculum development, skill sequencing, feedback methods, and assessment, are transferable. This shared ground justifies why TIS journals publish research on sign language interpreting, acknowledging its integral role within the discipline.

Pedagogical developments in spoken language interpreting may be integrated into the training of sign language interpreters. Innovative techniques from sign language interpreting pedagogy may offer insights for spoken interpreter education. The distinction between them lies in the information processing modalities: spoken language interpreting operates within an auditory-vocal channel, while sign language interpreting employs a visual-gestural channel. These modal differences influence how trainees perceive, process, and produce messages, necessitating tailored exercises for visual attention, spatial representation, and manual articulation. However, the underlying training objectives, such as developing analytical comprehension, memory, reformulation skills, and professionalism, remain the same. Therefore, pedagogical frameworks like simulation-based training and communicative competence development are applicable across both modes. For instance, the pedagogical concepts proposed in the interpreter education book series by Gallaudet University Press, a scholarly publisher that serves deaf people and signing communities, also apply to the education of spoken language interpreters.

**10. Esqueda and Moura:** Professor Xiangdong Li, we extend our deepest gratitude for your generous time and expertise. This dialogue has been a profoundly

enlightening experience, and your contributions—refined through decades of rigorous research and professional practice—reinforce the notion that interpreting studies still offer a wealth of unexplored territory. To conclude our session, would you care to share any final reflections or a parting message for our readers? Furthermore, given your most recent work on the future directions of the research landscape, are there any nascent findings or trends you would like to highlight as a final thought?

**Professor Xiangdong Li:**

I would like to express my sincere thanks for the opportunity to share my reflections on interpreter education.

Translation and Interpreting pedagogy has grown into a dynamic branch of research within TIS, particularly since the release of *The Interpreter and Translator Trainer* in 2007. Its development not only influences the accumulation of knowledge in the field, but also promotes innovative practices and enhances the quality of interpreter and translator training.

Looking ahead, I would like to highlight several directions for future research. While adequate attention has been devoted to themes such as instructional effectiveness, curriculum design, assessment, and market-oriented analyses, other critical areas remain less examined. These include trainer education and professional development, certification and accreditation, historical studies of T&I education, in-service and on-the-job training, and user or client education. I encourage colleagues to explore these underexplored domains in their future research. Those who are interested in those directions may refer to my recent work *Mapping the Research Landscape of Interpreter and Translator Education: Current Themes and Future Directions*.

## Selected Recent Publications by Professor Xiangdong Li

### Monograph

LI, X. **Mapping the research landscape of interpreter and translator education: Current themes and future directions.** London/New York: Routledge, 2025. DOI <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003487494>

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