

Between Bilingualism and Profession: The Unregulated State of Escort Interpreting in Ngazidja, Comoros

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Abstract

This study looks at the practice of escort interpreting in the Comoros Islands, using data collected in Ngazidja. The research objectives sought to describe and explain how escort interpreting is practiced in Comoros, find out those who serve as escort interpreters in Comoros and investigate the status of escort interpreting in Comoros. The findings, which are guided by Trait Theory, Control Theory, Practitioners' Competition Theory, and Tseng Model, show that escort interpreting is primarily performed by bilingual citizens who do not treat it as full-time employment and frequently see it as a transitional activity. The field is distinguished by the absence of professional associations, a disorganized market, uncertain compensation, and a lack of formal education. Although training emerges as a key solution, the study contends that a broader three-pillar strategy which entails professional education, market regulation, and increased policy and public awareness is required to move the sector towards professionalization. Further research is needed on the quality of escort interpreting in the Comoros.

1. INTRODUCTION

Community interpreting, also referred to as public service interpreting, dialogue interpreting, ad hoc interpreting or community-based interpreting (Chesher et al., 2003; Bancroft et al., 2013) is not a recent phenomenon. There is evidence that it has been practiced since ancient times, during military conflicts or peace talks (Rosendo & Persaud, 2016; Rosendo, 2022). Today, community interpreting is an umbrella term embracing a range of interpreting activities across diverse settings. These include health, education, and legal contexts (Bancroft et al., 2013). One subcategory of community interpreting is escort interpreting, typically required in informal settings such as trade fairs, tours, and meetings. This paper explores the practice of

escort interpreting in Ngazidja, Comoros, focusing on practitioners, challenges, and the profession's status.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Interpreting is generally defined as the oral transfer of messages between speakers of different languages (Fitria, 2024; Bezzouacha, 2025). Unlike translation, which allows revision, interpreting requires immediacy and accuracy in real-time communication (Pöchhacker, 2002; Seutla, 2024). This makes it more cognitively demanding and less verifiable. Scholars further distinguish between interpreting and translation in terms of form (oral versus written) and in terms of the skills required (Baker & Pérez-González, 2023; Carrasco Flores, 2021; Erton, 2020; Suttleworth & Cowie, 1997; Weber, 1984).

The literature (Pöchhacker, 2001; Tiselius, 2021,) recognizes two main categories of interpreting: conference interpreting and community interpreting. Conference interpreting is highly institutionalized, often simultaneous or consecutive (Mulyanah, 2020), and is commonly practiced in international organizations and official summits (Collados Aís et al., 2001; Setton & Dawrant, 2016). In contrast, community interpreting takes place in everyday contexts such as healthcare, education, and legal services (Hale, 2007). Community interpreting is also known as public service interpreting, liaison interpreting, or dialogue interpreting (Mikkelsen, 2010; Tipton & Furmanek, 2016). Escort interpreting, the focus of this study, and falls within community interpreting and typically occurs in informal settings such as trade fairs, guided tours, interviews, or business negotiations (Gonzalez, Vasquez, & Mikkelsen, 2013).

Community interpreting has grown significantly due to globalization, migration, and multiculturalism. It ensures equal access to essential services in multilingual societies, thereby reinforcing principles of democracy and participation (Corsellis, 2008; Erasmus, 2008). Community interpreters facilitate communication between service providers and clients, often taking on roles that extend beyond linguistic transfer to include cultural mediation and advocacy (Molefe, 2015; Lesch, 2023). In this sense, escort interpreters not only transmit meaning but also act as cultural brokers, helping bridge socio-cultural and power differences between interlocutors.

Community interpreting encompasses several interpreting forms including escort interpreting, legal interpreting, medical interpreting, and more. Escort interpreting, also known as liaison interpreting, involves interpreters accompanying clients to provide real-time language assistance in informal or semi-formal settings (Mulyanah, 2020). It is a specialized service in which an interpreter accompanies tourists or visitors, serving as both an oral translator and a

cultural liaison. Thus, the interpreter is responsible for accurately translating all communication between visitors and hosts. In addition to language translation, the escort interpreter manages practical, social, and business interactions, including tasks such as ordering meals and negotiating agreements. This service is adaptable and utilized in a variety of contexts, including sightseeing tours, meet-and-greet events, interviews, event hosting, and visits to specific locations (Al-Jarf, 2021). According to Mikkelsen (2010), escort interpreters act as facilitators between clients and the local environment. This service is vital in multilingual and multiethnic contexts such as Comoros, where French, Arabic, and Shikomori coexist.

According to Chen Gang as cited by Chilingaryan and Gorbatenko (2017), there is a lack of thorough and extensive research into the standards and principles governing this mode of interpretation. This gap is primarily due to the fact that the researchers who focus on it often have limited backgrounds in both practical interpretation and tour guiding. Even though research in this area is not extensive, Translation Studies indicate that escort interpretation possesses its own distinct standards, criteria, and exceptional strategies for evaluating quality and facilitating cross-cultural interactions (Chilingaryan & Gorbatenko, 2017). Escort interpretation is characterized by its spontaneity and the wide range of circumstances in which interpreters may be involved, including formal meetings, factory tours, and social events such as cocktail parties (Gonzalez, et al, 1991). In essence, escort interpreting denotes the interpretation services offered during engagements with government officials and business executives.

Despite its importance, escort interpreting remains under-professionalized and underdeveloped globally and particularly in Africa, where informal interpretation often substitutes formal structures due to lack of training institutions and regulatory frameworks. Tseng's (1992) model of professionalization emphasizes stages of development toward occupational legitimacy including training, formation of professional bodies, and public recognition. Professionalization requires traits such as a code of ethics, specialized training, and strong professional associations (Tseng, 1992). Theories of professionalization such as Trait Theory, Control Theory, and Tseng's Model, emphasize that occupations evolve into professions through structured training, practitioner solidarity, regulation of entry, and public recognition (Tseng, 1992).

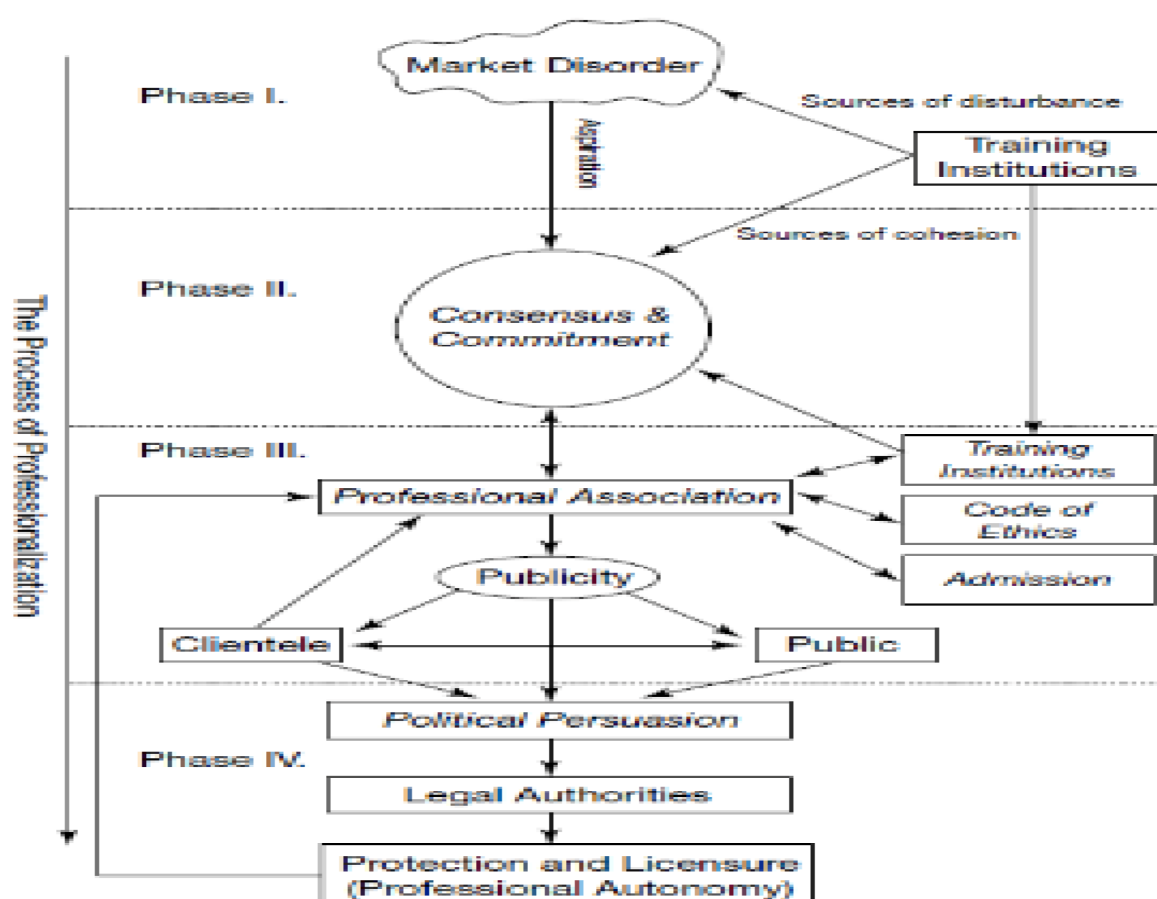
In their model, Tseng (1992) presents four phases which an occupation passes through to become a profession. The four stages of the evolution of a profession comprise I) market disorder; II) consolidation of the profession and consensus about professionals' aspirations; III) ethical standards; and IV) public acknowledgement. According to Tseng (1992), the key

areas essential for professional growth include education, involvement in professional organizations, and regulation of entry into the profession.

First, Tseng (1992) depicts what the market looked like before professionalization. According to him, a few salient features make it possible to deduce the level at which a trade is moving towards professionalization. Tseng (quoted in Mikkelsen, 2004) contends that market practitioners' professional status is undermined by two factors. First, they cannot prevent entry even by individuals who began their careers as outsiders or charlatans. Secondly, their clients are frequently unaware of the methods used or sceptical of the quality of service they receive.

This description can be summed up in these three articulations: confusion about the professional title, the lack of a systematic and exclusive body of knowledge about the profession, and the misconceptions of the general public about the profession. To overcome this lack of organization, Tseng (1992) profiles a model based on four (4) phases.

2.1. Tseng Model of Professionalization



Source: Tseng (1992)

The first phase advocates the creation of training centres. According to Tseng, this has its drawbacks, but it does create a base of professionals who can rethink the profession. For him,

after a few years and with a given proportion of trained professionals, they will be able to begin the process of professionalizing the profession, because they share similar aspirations for the profession and the clients.

The second phase consists of consolidating the position of the profession and finding common ground among professionals on the aspirations that one has for the profession. In this phase, the association of practitioners is born, which according to Tseng plays a leading role. The third phase is that the association works to raise the profile of the profession among clients, practitioners work together to influence the description of the profession as well as the behaviour of colleagues and design the conditions of acceptance of a practitioner into the association. This results in the formulation of a code of ethics governing the practice of the profession. According to Tseng, the fourth phase contributes to the esteem of the profession and the respect of the practitioners by the other actors of the market. It allows not only to establish the deontology, but also to control the entry into the profession. He explains as quoted by (Mikkelsen, 1996).

In contrast, escort interpreting often lacks these institutional structures, leaving it vulnerable to informality, inconsistent standards, and exploitation. Empirical studies highlight common challenges in escort interpreting worldwide. Research in China shows that escort interpreters face high communicative demands yet often operate without training, accreditation, or recognition (Ye, 2019). Similarly, in international tourism, escort interpreters are expected to combine linguistic competence with knowledge of cultural and sector-specific practices, but training in these areas is limited (Ievgen et al., 2022). Studies also note that interpreters must frequently adopt strategies to manage cultural differences, unfamiliar accents, and spontaneous interactions, often without institutional support (Fekete, 2021).

The increasing global engagement of China, particularly across economic, political, and cultural domains, has fuelled a growing need for interpreters, especially those providing escort interpreting services. Despite this rising demand, the sector is plagued by serious issues, including a disorganized market lacking standardization and weak processes for interpreter training and accreditation. A primary barrier to professionalism is the widespread but flawed assumption that simple English fluency is sufficient for effective escort interpreting, a view that stands in sharp contrast to the high standards associated with conference interpreting. This misconception effectively removes qualification barriers, devaluing formal training and accreditation, and ultimately hinders the development of a regulated and healthy interpreting profession (Ye, 2019).

A critical examination of the roles of tour escort interpreters, based on a case study grounded in Goffman's Participation Framework, reveals their complex and dynamic involvement in communication. This empirical study highlights that interpreters go beyond the traditional 'neutral conduit' role. They actively shift between various statuses, functioning as both 'recipients' and 'speakers'. Specifically, interpreters may act as 'addressed' or 'unaddressed recipients' and, more importantly, take on the roles of 'animators', 'authors', and 'principals'. These multifaceted roles are necessitated by factors such as differences in linguistic structure (for instance, between Chinese and English), multimodal cues from speakers, the interpreters' need to maintain discourse control, and the demand for cross-cultural communicative competence. The study's findings emphasize that effective tour escort interpreting requires not only linguistic transfer but also active management of the communicative context, which includes thorough pre-task preparation and attentiveness to non-verbal cues (Qin & Ruan, 2025).

In response to the need for improved professional standards in international tourism, research has focused on enhancing the translation competence of escort interpreters. An empirical study, which included pedagogical observations and an analysis of university training practices, developed and validated a unique model and methodology for this purpose. The findings revealed that translation competence is best cultivated through a customer-oriented approach that integrates specific professional and socio-cultural knowledge with essential relational skills, such as fostering dialogue and addressing cultural stereotypes. The methodology used is based on a dialogical concept of language improvement, utilizing professionally oriented language scenarios, simulations, and interactive teaching methods to embed the necessary competencies. The successful implementation and validation of this model provide a practical framework for improving interpreter training, ensuring that interpreters meet the combined demands of linguistic proficiency and effective cross-cultural communication in the tourism sector (Dolynskiy et al., 2022).

In African contexts, escort interpreting remains largely informal. Bilingual citizens frequently act as interpreters without formal qualifications, and remuneration is often uncertain (Rong, 2013). Cultural mediation is central to the role, with interpreters serving as both communicators and cultural transmitters (Hale, 2014). However, the lack of professional associations, training institutions, and ethical frameworks undermines recognition of the profession. These gaps highlight the urgent need for research into how escort interpreting functions in specific African contexts, such as the Comoros Islands, where multilingualism, tourism, and informal labour markets intersect.

Empirical studies on escort interpreting, including Dialga and Gandu's (2025) investigation in Burkina Faso, show that the practice is largely carried out by young, highly educated but mostly informally trained Burkinabè freelancers who perform a mixture of linguistic mediation and tourism-related tasks. Their study, based on questionnaires with 52 practitioners and interviews with tourism authorities, reveals that interpreters are predominantly male, aged 25–35, and hold bachelor's or master's degrees, yet only a minority have received formal interpreting training from institutions such as Université Joseph Ki-Zerbo. The profession remains weakly regulated, with limited awareness of and very low membership in professional associations such as AITF, even though most respondents claim adherence to ethical principles like neutrality, confidentiality, and professionalism. Empirically, escort interpreters frequently perform additional duties such as tour guiding, administrative assistance, and event organisation while relying mainly on consecutive interpreting and whispering modes in multilingual, tourist-oriented settings

3. METHODOLOGY

This research employed an exploratory qualitative design to investigate the intricate practice of escort interpreting in Comoros. A field study approach was deliberately chosen to emphasize a comprehensive understanding of the local and social context rather than focusing solely on statistical representativeness. The study population consisted of active escort interpreters and members of the general public who use these services in Comoros.

To implement the chosen qualitative design and gather rich, context-specific data, the research utilized a standardized electronic questionnaire as the primary data collection instrument. This questionnaire was administered remotely via Google Forms to the target population in Ngazidja, Comoros. This specifically aimed at individuals who are currently serving or have previously served as escort interpreters. The questionnaire consisted of thirty questions and primarily employed an open-ended format, systematically designed to elicit qualitative insights into the status, working conditions, and challenges faced by interpreters. Additionally, it gathered specific information regarding their profiles, languages used, remuneration, and training. Out of the 50 questionnaires distributed, 30 responses were received, resulting in a response rate of 60%. The theoretical foundation for the entire study was supported by several key frameworks, including Tseng's model, Trait Theory, Control Theory, and Practitioners' Competition Theory.

Ethical clearance was obtained from university authorities, and the principles of anonymity, confidentiality, and informed consent were strictly followed. All participants were fully informed about the study's objectives. The data collected via Google Forms were

systematically presented in diagrams and analyzed using Tseng's (1992) theory of professionalization of community interpreting, which served as a framework for interpreting the realities and challenges encountered in the practice of escort interpreting in Comoros.

4. FINDINGS

This section presents key empirical findings regarding the practice, profile, and status of escort interpreting in Comoros, based on data collected from 27 completed questionnaires out of 30 responses from Comorian interpreters. The data reveal that escort interpreting in the Comoros is predominantly an informal and transitory profession. This conclusion is supported by the interpreter profile: over 90% of interpreters are under the age of 35, and a majority (87%) work part-time, with only one-third considering it a full-time, long-term career.

A significant imbalance exists in both the working languages and the client base. While the majority of respondents (79%) reported using the local language, Shikomori, the more internationally valuable languages were used less frequently: French (13%), English (6%), and Arabic (2%). This stark contrast is noteworthy given that the most commonly mastered language combination among respondents is French and English (61%), indicating a disconnect between available skill sets and market demand. The client base is primarily local, with 57% of clients being of Comorian origin. This suggests that the market limits opportunities for generating foreign revenue. However, a slight majority of interpreters also reported having French-speaking clients and English-speaking clients.

Importantly, the profession lacks fundamental standardization. The study found that there are no professional associations for interpreters and any consistent training or certification mechanisms in place. Consequently, 22 out of 30 respondents noted the absence of a standard rate of remuneration. This lack of standardized pay contributes directly to interpreter dissatisfaction, as over 60% of interpreters reported being unhappy with their income. This dissatisfaction reinforces the high rate of part-time, transitory practice within the profession.

The study reveals that the typical escort interpreter in Ngazidja is young, highly educated, yet lacks professional credentials in the field of interpreting, practicing within a largely informal market. The sector is dominated by young people, with over 90% of respondents under the age of 35, and the gender distribution is nearly equal (16 male, 14 female). Geographically, most practitioners are concentrated in the capital city, Moroni (30%), and Mitsamihouli (20%), but a notable number have migrated from other islands, suggesting a lack of sufficient local practitioners in Ngazidja. This transient market profile is further highlighted by the finding that nearly half of the respondents (46.67%) had less than one year of experience.

Despite this demographic profile, interpreters are generally highly educated, with 56.67% holding a Bachelor's degree and 30% holding a Master's degree. However, this academic strength does not translate into specific professional qualification, as none of the respondents had received formal, dedicated training as interpreters. A majority (56.67%) reported having no specific qualification in interpretation, and only a small fraction (3.33%) had attended a training workshop, confirmed by the fact that only one in five participants had ever taken a professional interpreting test.

This systemic gap in certification contributes directly to the profession's lack of standardization and organizational structure. The study concludes that escort interpreting in the Comoros is fundamentally not professionalized. The vast majority of interpreters (28 out of 30) reported no standard remuneration rate, and there is no clear self-regulation: only two respondents reported belonging to a professional association, and only one acknowledged the existence of a code of ethics. Consequently, the lack of professional organization means that interpreters' roles and responsibilities are primarily dictated by individual employers rather than by the practitioners themselves or a governing body.

5. DISCUSSION

This analysis interprets the results through the frameworks of Mikkelsen's trait theory and Tseng's theory of control, both of which highlight the significant challenges faced by this profession. The data strongly support the assertion that escort interpreting in Comoros does not meet the standards of a professionalized trade. Notably, the significant absence of trained interpreters among respondents is concerning, especially since 56.67% of them hold a Bachelor's degree or higher. This aligns with Martínez-Gómez's (2015) warning that untrained bilinguals can create serious problems, such as inadequate skills, lack of cross-cultural understanding, and poor word choices.

The most requested international languages, French and English, are underutilized compared to the local language, Shikomori, revealing a gap in quality control. Individuals with only a general background in foreign languages often step in as substitutes for specialized interpreters. This highlights the urgent need for professional skill development that goes beyond just being bilingual. Escort interpreting in Ngazidja, Comoros, is still in the early stages of professionalization as described by Tseng's model. The profession currently faces significant challenges, including market disorder, informal participation, lack of established standards, and no control over access. The presence of many young, bilingual individuals suggests there is untapped potential that could be developed through structured training and regulatory support.

The absence of a national interpreter association hinders the establishment of ethical guidelines and collective bargaining for fair compensation. Introducing interpreter education in higher learning institutions and promoting public awareness can help legitimize and formalize the profession. Findings from this study indicate that escort interpreting in Comoros is an unregulated and transitional activity that lacks professional maturity.

Comparisons with Chinese studies, particularly those by Ye (2019), and Qin and Ruan (2025), show that escort interpreting in both contexts suffers from market disorder, lax professional regulation, and the widespread belief that basic bilingual ability is sufficient for the task. Just like in the Comoros, many Chinese clients underestimate the skill required and frequently hire untrained bilinguals, resulting in inconsistent standards and limited recognition of the profession. Despite these similarities, China operates on a much larger scale, with increased communicative demands fuelled by rapid growth in international tourism, business, and diplomacy.

When compared to African studies such as Rong (2013) and Dialga and Gandu's (2025) research in Burkina Faso, the Comorian context bears striking similarities to other African interpreting environments in which bilingual citizens rather than trained professionals dominate the market, remuneration remains unstable, and interpreters frequently perform mixed roles that go beyond linguistic mediation. However, even within this continental profile, the Comoros exhibits an even greater level of informality, as evidenced by respondents' complete lack of ethical codes, professional associations, and systematic training exposure. These comparisons show that, while the challenges in the Comoros are similar to those documented in China and other African contexts, the Comorian escort interpreting sector suffers from more severe structural weaknesses. This supports the conclusion that the proposed three-pillar strategy (professional education, market regulation, and increased policy and public awareness) is not only appropriate but also required for guiding the field towards meaningful professionalization.

Additionally, the most critical finding is the lack of both internal and external control, which contradicts Tseng's (1992) theory of control. This theory states that professionalization is marked by practitioners' ability to manage their work and the marketplace. The data reveal the following:

Lack of Internal Control

Only two interpreters belong to an association, and just one adheres to a code of ethics. This significant absence of collective self-regulation results in a chaotic market where the profession is organized not by interpreters, but rather by employers.

Lack of External Control

The absence of standardized remuneration rates and the roles imposed by employers indicate that practitioners have very little power. This situation sharply contrasts with a ‘powerful profession,’ which typically has strong associations. Consequently, two-thirds of the respondents view the profession as temporary, leading to a high turnover rate among inexperienced practitioners (46.67% report having less than one year of experience), which further undermines service quality.

This study identifies several interconnected challenges stemming from core issues of recognition and lack of professionalization:

Training Deficit

The complete lack of formal interpreting programs and training workshops stifles skill development, negatively affecting service quality. This situation also fails to harness the potential of the predominantly young demographic (over 90% under the age of 35) eager to enter the market.

Market Instability

Low, unregulated remuneration and a prevalence of part-time, short-term practitioners create an unstable market. This instability is self-reinforcing and hinders the growth of experienced professionals (only 13% have more than five years of experience), who are essential for establishing market standards.

Governmental Policy Vacuum

The absence of a governmental policy or legal framework for language services exacerbates the issue, reflecting a low priority for this profession, which is vital to a tourist destination like the Comoros.

The findings of this study carry broad implications for the development of escort interpreting in Comoros, particularly given the profession’s current position at the earliest stage of Tseng’s professionalization model. At a policy level, the absence of any legal or institutional framework regulating interpreting services indicates that the sector will remain informal and undervalued

unless government action is taken. Formal recognition of interpreting as a specialized profession is essential for establishing training pathways, accreditation mechanisms, ethical guidelines, and standardized remuneration. Such recognition is particularly crucial as Comoros seeks to expand its tourism and investment sectors, where reliable and culturally competent language mediation is a key component of effective international engagement.

In practical terms, the results highlight an urgent need for structured capacity-building initiatives. The current pool of young, educated but untrained (in interpreting) bilinguals represents a significant yet untapped resource that could be transformed into a competent professional workforce with the right support. Training programs, workshops, and continuous professional development would improve the quality of interpreting, enhance cross-cultural communication, and reduce misunderstandings that may negatively affect client experiences. Establishing a professional association would further strengthen the field by fostering collective identity, encouraging adherence to ethical standards, stabilizing remuneration practices, and giving practitioners a unified voice in shaping their profession.

Theoretically, the study underscores the importance of viewing professionalization not merely as a function of demand but as a process dependent on institutional support, practitioner organization, and societal recognition. The Comorian case illustrates how linguistic labour becomes constrained when bilingual ability is mistaken for professional expertise, reinforcing insights from Trait Theory and Control Theory about the need for specialized competencies and collective regulation. By comparing Comoros with more developed contexts like China and other African countries, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how professionalization unfolds unevenly across different socio-economic environments. It shows that without deliberate structural reforms, the sector risks stagnating in a perpetual state of informality, regardless of the growing need for language services.

Overall, the implications point toward a clear conclusion: meaningful improvements in the quality, stability, and recognition of escort interpreting in Comoros will require coordinated action across policy, practice, and professional theory. Strengthening each of these dimensions is essential for transforming escort interpreting from a temporary, ad-hoc activity into a respected and sustainable profession capable of supporting the country's multilingual communication needs.

6. CONCLUSION

This article examined the current state of escort interpreting in Ngazidja, Comoros. It revealed that, despite a clear and growing demand for language mediation essential to tourism and business, the field remains largely unprofessional and lacks structure. The practice depends

entirely on a pool of highly educated young bilinguals (over 90% are under 35) who are critically untrained in the specialized field of interpretation and mostly view this work as a temporary job. This transitional state is characterized by a significant absence of institutional support, regulation, and standardization, leaving practitioners with little control over their work environment, including their compensation and professional development.

To transform escort interpreting from a casual activity into an essential, standardized service sector, a comprehensive three-pillar strategy focused on empowerment and control in the market is urgently needed:

Pillar 1: Formalize Education and Credentials. Professionalization is crucial and must begin at the educational level. This requires establishing dedicated training institutes and implementing standardized testing and certification processes. These steps are essential to ensure that interpreters develop the specialized skills necessary for delivering quality service, thereby moving the field beyond mere bilingualism.

Pillar 2: Empower and Regulate the Market. The market must be stabilized through both internal and external controls. This can be achieved by supporting the creation of a strong national professional association with an enforceable code of ethics, as well as establishing standardized remuneration rates. These measures are vital for empowering practitioners, asserting their collective control over market practices, and stabilizing the high turnover rates.

Pillar 3: Promote Public Awareness and Policy. Finally, sustained awareness campaigns should be launched to educate the public, the judiciary, and key stakeholders about the crucial, specialized role of professional language mediation in a multilingual economy. Furthermore, the Comorian government must address the existing policy vacuum by developing a legal framework that recognizes and protects the language service industry.

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