Certification Forum:
Computerized Certification Exam (CCE)

By Gabe Bokor, chair, CCE Task Force

One of the most frequently asked questions about ATA's Certification Program is: Why is the exam still being given in the old-fashioned way on paper, despite the fact that translators have been using computers for over a decade? The reason lies in the complexity of ensuring the security that is essential for the integrity of the program, while at the same time ensuring the same test conditions for all candidates regardless of their language combination. Past attempts to computerize the certification program have failed to surmount the technical difficulties in ensuring adequate security while providing a simple, convenient, and fair exam.

In October 2004, Certification Chair Lilian Van Vranken appointed Gabe Bokor to chair a task force with the mandate to study the feasibility of a computerized certification exam (CCE). A CCE Task Force consisting of (listed in alphabetical order) Verónica Albin, Carla DiFranco, Cristina Márquez Arroyo, Alan Melby, Tony Roder, and Jost Zetzsche was formed immediately. Members of the Certification Committee joined the CCE Task Force ex officio and participated in its discussions.

Between November 2004 and April 2005, more than 900 messages were exchanged within the CCE Task Force's Yahoo! Group, and many more privately between members and third parties. Questions discussed within the CCE Task Force included whether to use computers owned by the candidates, by ATA, or by third parties, and whether to allow candidates Internet access, spell checkers, and electronic dictionaries. Should the source text be provided on paper or electronically? Should the translation be submitted on paper or electronically? Should candidates be able to proof their translations on paper?

The CCE Task Force's decisions took into account practical considerations, exam security, and the nature of the ATA certification exam. The Certification Committee defines the exam as testing the "language skills" of a professional translator: comprehension of the source text, translation skills, and writing in the target language. In discussing the proposal, ATA Board members recognized the distinction between career skills (such as research skills) demonstrated in the marketplace and translation competence demonstrated in a proctored test under controlled conditions. In the CCE, as in the on-paper exam, candidates will not have access to the Internet, spell checkers, or electronic dictionaries. The question of allowing candidates to print-and-proofread raised practicality issues that remain under investigation.

By April, the CCE Task Force arrived at a consensus regarding the system to be used and the provider who offered the best features at a reasonable cost. The main features of the system selected are the following:

1. The system is Web based, i.e., the source text is presented to the candidate in an intuitive and user-friendly environment, and the finished translation is submitted via the Web when the candidate clicks the Finish button.

2. The exam is held at third-party locations in a proctored environment.

3. The computers at the testing venues are certified by the selected exam provider prior to the exams for compatibility with the provider's software, the presence of the required keyboards, and glitch-free transmission of the exam.

4. Special software, supplied on a CD, prevents access to any other application on the computer during the exam.

5. No software is installed on the computer (this was the requirement of many sites where CCE exams will be held).

6. Graders evaluate exams on-screen using special Excel-based forms. Current grading standards and criteria will remain the same.

The system provider that has been selected is ALTA Language Services, based in Atlanta, Georgia, which has been providing computerized language exams to corporations, healthcare organizations, and government agencies since 1996. Nevertheless, ALTA's existing system had to be modified to meet ATA's high security standards and the requirement of some potential hosts not to have any software installed on their computers.

ALTA will charge ATA a one-time setup fee and a yearly maintenance fee. At its April 22, 2005 meeting, ATA's Board of Directors accepted the report submitted by the CCE Task Force and the Certification Committee and agreed to fund the initial expenditure for the CCE.

Computerized practice exams (which do not require the modification in ALTA's software that is needed for the actual exam) will start as soon as the administrative details are settled between ATA Headquarters and ALTA. The full system will be field-tested between the time ALTA's modified software is available (foreseeably in August 2005) and the end of 2005. A demo is planned for ATA's Annual Conference

in Seattle (November 9-12), with actual CCE starting in early 2006, if approved by ATA's Board of Directors.

CCE and computerized practice tests will be offered as an option for an undetermined period, with separate paper-and-pencil exam sittings also available as long as a sufficient number of candidates prefer that option.

With CCE, we believe the ATA becomes the first translators' organization to computerize its certification program, pioneering the use of technology in response to the wishes expressed by many of its members. While the CCE system selected does not exactly simulate the conditions under which professional translators work, it represents a significant step in that direction. As technology advances, we will determine whether or not to remove more of those restrictions that prevent full use of the computer's capabilities without affecting the security, convenience, and fairness of the exam.

Several universities have already agreed to host the ATA CCE. However, in order to make the CCE a success, we need more sites throughout the country to provide certification sittings convenient to all members. Therefore, ATA members, in particular those connected to universities, are encouraged to participate in the site recruitment effort by advising CCE Task Force members of prospective CCE sites, or by contacting those responsible for the institution's computer lab about the possibility of hosting ATA's certification exams.

ata

Upcoming Seminars and Conferences

International Federation of Translators Statutory and General Congress

August 4-7, 2005
Tampere, Finland
www.fit-ift.org

ATA Professional Development Seminar "The Business of Translating and Interpreting"

September 24, 2005
Salt Lake City, Utah
www.atanet.org

ATA 46th Annual Conference

November 9-12, 2005
Seattle, Washington
www.atanet.org