THE CONSTRUCTIVE CRITICISM MODEL

By

Nancy Schweda Nicholson

University of Delaware, U.S.A.

I. Introduction
It goes without saying that good instructors constantly offer feedback to students regarding their interpretation skills. This feedback, if "constructive criticism", assists trainees in identifying their strengths and weaknesses, and contributes to improved performance during subsequent exercises. However, to the best of the author's knowledge, the quality and types of critique sessions have rarely been subjects of formal discussion in scholarly publications. As a result, the current paper (1) reviews different kinds of feedback for simultaneous and consecutive interpretation (including terminology choice, lag time, public-speaking skills, completeness, accuracy, handling of difficult points, and so on); (2) examines the role of the instructor in providing constructive criticism; (3) suggests ways in which classmates can participate in the critique and debriefing sessions; (4) offers an illustration of the constructive criticism model in action during consecutive interpretation practice; and (5) provides information on students' reactions to diverse types of feedback.

II. The Constructive Criticism Model
For purposes of this discussion, "constructive criticism" is defined as "instructor and student feedback on interpreter performance which incorporates (1) the identification of the problem (whether linguistic, content, demeanor or a combination thereof); (2) an examination of acceptable alternative approaches to the targeted area of difficulty; and (3) an analysis of why the error was made." With the goal of constructive criticism in mind, one can propose a series of issues to be explored during debriefing sessions:
(1) Which aspects of the form or substance of the rendition are identified as incorrect or inappropriate?
(2) Why are they unacceptable?
(3) Which alternatives are possible?
(4) Is one alternative better than the others? Why?
The principal strengths of this model are that it (a) singles out the problem area(s); (b) encourages flexibility in the identification of acceptable options; and (c) teaches students to analyze the reasons for their mistakes.

A. Instructor and Student Feedback
The first part of the definition includes "instructor and student feedback". A fundamental component of the constructive criticism model is the instructor's willingness to include the entire class in the process. For example, at the start of the course, students are informed that they will be considered "experts" in their native/dominant tongues. Groups of trainees are generally composed of both native and non-native speakers of the course's working languages, so the value of one's language knowledge is emphasized in the earliest stages of the program. Inasmuch as interpreter training can be intimidating (especially for beginners) and frustrating (for teachers and students alike), it is a good idea to impress upon the trainees the idea that they have something important to offer the class: the language background and knowledge they bring with them.

It should be noted that students cannot immediately provide feedback to their classmates, as they must learn how to interact with each other and tackle the problem at hand by observing the instructor(s). Interpreter trainers are a diverse group. They all have their own preferred ways of communicating with students and dealing with the challenges of interpretation. However, based on the author's experience, a low-key and non-threatening approach to correction is not only most successful but is also best accepted by the trainees. It is the instructor's responsibility to provide a positive model for interaction and correction. The author
stresses kindness and considerate behavior during critique sessions because there is nothing worse than intimidating students by making them feel stupid or foolish about their errors. A cold, empathic, negative "That's wrong!" or "You did a terrible job!" is replaced by a constructive, positive comment such as: "Let's look back at that section of the speech and examine what you said. In hindsight, do you believe that this particular term is appropriate in the current context? Why or why not? If not, what alternatives could you suggest?" After the trainees have observed and internalized the constructive criticism techniques, they should be encouraged to participate. The concept that "everyone is here to learn from one another" is fundamental and is reinforced throughout training. More specifically, the current approach emphasizes the establishment of a two-tiered learning hierarchy: (1) teacher-student; and (2) student-student.

Historically, student-teacher interaction has been characterized by a "top down" perspective, with the teacher as "judge" and "corrector", placing students in the traditional "receptive" role. Although this scenario still remains an integral part of instructional situations, an egalitarian approach can also be an effective teaching tool. To be more specific, the egalitarian model does not limit feedback regarding corrections and suggestions for improvement to the instructor alone. Rather, classmates are required to actively take part in critique sessions. In this way, students offer feedback to each other in addition to receiving the instructor's comments.

The teacher is always there to direct discussions, to resolve disagreements, and to offer guidance as to the validity or appropriateness of a particular criticism. This technique is viewed in a positive way, because students receive critiques on their performance from various sources. Therefore, this approach also serves to build confidence in the early stages of training because trainees realize that their roles are not only receptive and passive, but also ones of active participation in critique sessions. At first, a minority of students may have difficulty adjusting to this interactive "class-based" (as opposed to "teacher-based" or "student-based") approach. However, they quickly see the value of the methodology and become adept at following the instructor's example of offering "critique with kindness". The key to the success of such a system basically lies with the instructors, for it is they who provide the model for all constructive criticism.

B. Identification of the Problem

As outlined in the Introduction, one can identify various types of errors in an interpreted speech. Most often, they fit the categories of (1) terminology; (2) lag time; (3) public-speaking skills (for consecutive interpretation especially); (4) completeness and accuracy; and (5) handling of difficult points.

1. Terminology

"Terminology" can include (a) specialized words which are unique to a particular discipline as well as (b) one's choice of words in general, considering the relevant context. For example, much of the terminology of international organizations such as the United Nations (UN) and the Organization of American States (OAS) is quite standardized and, although there may exist additional acceptable alternatives for expressing a particular idea outside these specialized environments, certain terms are used relatively consistently by members of the UN and OAS.

Let's examine the use of the word "special". If one wishes to say "a special session" in Spanish, it is una sesión extraordinaria or un período extraordinario de sesiones. The word especial does not figure in this term. The same is generally true for French: une session extraordinaire, (although the author has noted in UN speech transcripts that some French-speaking delegates use une session spéciale). In parallel versions of the Charter of the

---

1 It is worthy of mention that simultaneous and consecutive interpretation critique sessions proceed a bit differently because of the nature of the techniques. Unlike consecutive interpretation, during which all of the trainees listen together to each other's renditions, simultaneous practice is carried out with students in the booths working with a partner. It is logistically impossible for trainees to monitor all of their classmates' interpretations; they are only aware of what is transpiring in their own booth as they monitor personal performance and that of their boothmate. Consequently, students become involved in simultaneous debriefing during a general discussion period. When the speech concludes, trainees come out of the booths and meet as a group to offer reactions to the text and evaluations of their own rendition. At this time, the instructor highlights strong and weak points of each student's interpretation, as she or he has been switching from trainee to trainee, monitoring output, and making notes during the course of the speech. This procedure allows classmates to share their observations about the speed, difficulty, or subject matter of the text, for example, and suggest vocabulary alternatives in problem areas. A more detailed examination of consecutive interpretation critique techniques is provided in Section III.
United Nations, "special session" is translated in the following ways:

"The General Assembly shall meet in regular annual sessions and in such special sessions as occasion may require."


"La Asamblea General se reunirá anualmente en sesiones ordinarias y, cada vez que las circunstancias lo exijan, en sesiones extraordinarias."


"L’Assemblée générale tient une session annuelle régulière et, lorsque les circonstances l’exigent, des sessions extraordinaires."

(Article 20: p. 15, French version).

In the context of "special session", the Charter of the Organization of American States also uses extraordinario (Spanish: Artículo 56, p. 18) and extraordinaire (French: Article 56, p. 18).

It should be noted, however, that when the word "special" is not used with "session", other alternatives are selected in Spanish and French in both the UN and OAS Charters. For example, "special reports" appears as "les rapports spéciaux" (French: Article 15, p.12 - UN Charter) and "informes ... especiales" (Spanish: Artículo 15, p. 12 - UN Charter).

When uninitiated students hear the expression "special session" for the first time, Spanish-speakers may select "una sesión especial", "una sesión suplementaria" or, perhaps, "una sesión particular". Any of the alternatives listed may convey the meaning but, within the context of UN and OAS terminology, the generally accepted term for "a special session" is: "una sesión extraordinaria" (Spanish) or "une session extraordinaire" (French). As noted, students might select a more literal, one-word equivalent to express "special" if (a) they are not cognizant of the common UN and OAS usage of extraordinaria and extraordinaire or (b) they are unaware of the meaning behind the term. However, if trainees know that a "special session" is an additional group of meetings not previously scheduled, then they may choose an expression like una sesión además de las que están en el programa or una sesión en adición de aquellas en el programa. Although much longer, these phrases carry an explanation of the meaning of the term and may assist an uninformed listener in identifying the concept.

If one considers a more general area, usage of certain terms is governed not only by context but also by register. For example, during the course of a formal speech, a "female individual" could be referred to as a "woman", a "lady" or a "girl" (depending upon age), but never a "babe", "chick", "broad" or "honey".

As a brief aside in connection with the above examples, students must constantly be reminded throughout their training that a dictionary, while generally helpful, should be used with caution. In order to employ this reference tool in an optimal fashion, one must have a clear understanding of the context in which the word appears. Let’s say that trainees have a text to prepare in advance, and the term "special session" appears therein. If they are unfamiliar with the term, their first instinct will probably be to look up "special". If one does so in the English to French section of Harrap’s Modern College French and English Dictionary (Mansions 1977:S-67), none of the alternatives listed is extraordinaire. However, if one turns to extraordinaire in the French to English section, the entry does include "special" as in "meeting, messenger" (Mansions 1977:E-44). The point is that the trainees would never have found extraordinaire by simply looking under "special" in the English section.

2. Lag Time

Lag time, of course, is mainly a factor in simultaneous interpretation. A typical example of lag time difficulties when working to or from English and a Romance Language such as French or Spanish is the difference in adjective-noun order. Students need to have their attention focused on the importance of appropriate lag time and be apprised of their mistakes. When trainees do not maintain adequate lag time, they find themselves forced to go back and correct. In this way, they lose valuable analysis time for subsequent material, and may even miss hearing new information because their attention is so completely focused on correcting their mistake. Lag time errors are common early in training; however, most students learn with practice and experience that lag must be adjusted accordingly and that following the speaker too closely can result in disastrous consequences.

3. Public Speaking

Public speaking skills for consecutive interpretation are critical. This is an area in which almost every trainee will encounter difficulty. Students are trying out their fledgling note-taking and interpretation skills and, at the same time, are
instructed to stand in front of the class to present their rendition. This can be a very intimidating experience for beginners. Typical problem areas include: (a) minimal eye contact with the audience; (b) not speaking loudly enough; (c) distracting habits (such as tapping a pencil on the podium or shifting one's weight from foot to foot, thereby producing a rocking motion); and (d) long pauses during which trainees are often trying to decipher their notes. Once again, the critique approach should be to the point but as gentle and non-threatening as possible. It is important not to discourage new students. This is accomplished by mixing positive and negative comments during the debriefing session. Although often difficult in the early stages because students make a number of mistakes, it is important to try to balance the negative comments with positive ones.

4. Completeness and Accuracy
Completeness and accuracy are extremely important. Student interpreters must always strive to include all of the content material. However, it is possible to rank information as to importance by analyzing its role in the text. The author always tells students that there are points on an imaginary continuum which include different levels of completeness and accuracy. An omission is always considered in terms of its importance to the overall content. For example, a practice article may read: "Peter Stanislaus, a University of Colorado professor, and his research team conducted the liver transplant study over a two-year period". Often, because of the presence of the unfamiliar proper name, a beginning student interpreter doing consecutive will get either the person's name or his title. Ideally, of course, both pieces of information are important, but it is not generally viewed as a serious error to omit the person's first name, thereby saying: "Professor Stanislaus of the University of Colorado ...". An interpreter who misses the name entirely may choose to say: "Researchers at the University of Colorado ...". Although the above interpretations are not entirely complete when compared with the original, they fall at different locations on the continuum, which is viewed as a relative measure of the information as a whole.

5. Handling of Difficult Points
Students are to be complimented when they handle a difficult point well. For example, an esoteric adjective may be replaced by a more common one which includes the qualifier "very" or "extremely". An interpreter generally has two options when faced with troublesome material. She or he may (1) omit it altogether; or (2) attempt to get the meaning across in the better way possible which may be neither eloquent nor enlightened. Of course, the latter choice is the best one, as omitting material means the audience will have no opportunity whatsoever to try to connect what may be an awkward but comprehensible rendering to the whole of the context.

C. Acceptable Alternatives
Up to this point, the current paper has examined procedures for establishing a successful and workable feedback system in the interpretation classroom, with an emphasis on teacher-student and student-student interaction. Another component of a constructive criticism model is that of identifying alternatives and, once again, rating them on a continuum basis. Very often, students will begin the personal evaluation of their rendition by saying: "I just couldn't think of the word for "strengthen" in Spanish." Inasmuch as the trainee is no longer under the immediate pressure to come up with the word, she or he may think of it (as well as several alternatives) during the debriefing session. In Spanish, for example, fortalecer, reforzar, consolidar, and intensificar quickly come to mind. An excellent exercise for cognitive flexibility training is to choose a word and have students focus on calling forth as many synonyms as they can (Schweda Nicholson 1990). The philosophy behind this procedure is that, if trainees know five different ways to say one thing when not under pressure, at least one of those five will be accessible when in a stressful situation.

During discussions of synonyms and their use in contextualized settings, it is also important to emphasize that several alternatives may be equally acceptable. There are times when one perfect word or expression exists but, quite often, two or three synonyms may clearly fit the context. Language is infinitely complex and is characterized by tremendous flexibility. Interpreter trainees soon learn that there are many ways to say one thing. During debriefing, students should be given feedback on their choice of words as well as encouraged to suggest additional alternatives.

D. Analysis
One of the primary goals of the constructive criticism model is to force students to think for
themselves and continuously improve their interpretation performance by analyzing their mistakes as well as the mistakes of their classmates. As mentioned earlier, it is not sufficient to tell a student "that was rendered incorrectly". The instructor should explore with the student (and the class as a whole) why it was wrong and, at the same time, offer correct alternative ways of interpreting the same material. The trainee should be encouraged to figure out the answers to questions of terminology, stylistics, acceptable register, contextual appropriateness, requisite public speaking skills, and so on. In order for students to minimize or avoid repetition of the same types of mistakes over and over, they must be provided with feedback which will enable them to analyze and evaluate their errors in a broader context. This technique permits trainees to carry forward their analysis skills and apply them to new material and situations.

The following are examples of typical student problems and suggestions for appropriate feedback:

(a) **Instructor Question:** "Why was your lag time so short?"

**Student Response:** "Well, I was afraid that I would fall behind and start to miss material, so I tried to stay as close as I could. Of course, this proved to be a counter-productive strategy because I had difficulty with adjective-noun structure going from French to English and found that I had to go back and correct myself. As a result, I wasted precious analysis time".

**Outcome/Suggested Feedback:** Through practice and experience, students come to realize that they must work at a longer lag, especially with this type of language combination. The instructor may wish to suggest: "As an exercise the next time you interpret simultaneously, try to consciously stay five to seven words behind the speaker and see if this strategy helps with your lag time difficulties".

(b) **Instructor Question:** "You said that United Airlines operates 50 flights per day out of Gate C-17. What did you have in your notes, 15 or 50?"

**Student Response:** "I had 15, but as I was interpreting, I thought about it and Dulles Airport is so big that I figured 15 was too small of a number, so I changed it to 50. I thought I heard it wrong. Now, in hindsight, I realize that 50 is way too many; it would mean that, operating on a 24-hour flying basis (which it does not), United would send approximately one flight out every 30 minutes. That's just not possible".

**Outcome/Suggested Feedback:** Over time and with continued practice, the trainee will become better at monitoring the informational material, the overall context and, very importantly, how individual content items fit into the text as a whole. The instructor may advise: "Trust what you hear the first time. Rely on your notes. Consider the relevant context when something does not sound quite right".

(c) **Instructor Comment:** "At times, you swallowed your words and spoke so softly that we could hardly hear you in the audience. You have a strong voice and, generally, you project quite well."

**Student Response:** "I was nervous and somewhat unsure of the material. I had trouble with note-taking this time, and my short-term memory didn't help because I was more focused on writing than on listening for the main ideas. I know that I was speaking too softly, but I honestly didn't realize that I was swallowing my words. I guess it was an unconscious strategy to try to hide my lack of understanding of some parts of the text."

**Outcome/Suggested Feedback:** This student needs to work on developing better note-taking and listening skills which will, in turn, enable her or him to divide attention between listening and writing. As a result, she or he will improve grasp of the information and feel confident about rendition, thus speaking clearly and projecting voice into the audience. The instructor can offer the following feedback: "Try to listen more and write less. Your short-term memory will serve you well if you have listened and understood the speech. Your notes should merely offer support for..."
the information you are holding in your short-term memory”.

It is often reassuring for students to know that they are not the only ones having difficulty. There is an old saying: “Misery loves company”. It is a good idea for instructors, when discussing a particular trainee’s problem, to ask the rest of the class if they have found themselves in the same predicament. Generally, other students will be able to identify with the situation and will readily offer suggestions as to how they dealt with it personally or how they analyzed their performance and have improved subsequently. If appropriate, the instructor may also wish to remind the trainees of similar cases which have occurred with other current class members, or perhaps draw upon examples from previous years.

III. The Constructive Criticism Model in Action: Consecutive Interpretation Debriefing

The author divides consecutive critique sessions into three sections: (a) linguistic (such as word/terminology choice, syntax, grammar); (b) content (completeness, accuracy); and (c) demeanor (voice, eye contact, delivery speed, backtracking, distracting gestures or habits, and so on).

Before continuing on to a discussion of the nuts and bolts of the consecutive critique session, it is important to note that the student who gave the speech is considered the “expert” and it is she or he who is consulted when there is a disagreement as to content. However, problems of accuracy and omissions are dealt with first by the trainee who did the interpretation, then by classmates and the instructor. The “expert” is not consulted until all other discussion avenues have been exhausted.

From an organizational point of view, then, consecutive critique proceeds in the following manner: (1) As soon as the interpretation is over, the student who interpreted is asked to provide a personal evaluation. It is extremely helpful to all of the students for each trainee interpreter to monitor and take an introspective view of her or his rendition. For example, a common linguistic problem deals with word choice. A student may state with exasperation: “I drew a blank when I needed the word for “encourage” in Spanish”. Moreover, the trainee may suffer from interference of a structural nature. In other words, she or he may impose a Spanish syntactic pattern on her or his target-language rendition in English. This is most often a problem in simultaneous interpretation because of the constant overlap between the source and target languages. With respect to content, the student will often say something like, “I know I missed the name of the Ambassador to Thailand” or “I am certain I made a mistake in the section on economic development - I think I got one of my statistics wrong” or “I know I omitted some material right at the beginning because I was concentrating on the unfamiliar proper names”. After the student offers her or his personal assessment of the content area, it is time for her or him to consider demeanor. Typical comments in this area include: “I know that my eye contact was less than satisfactory - I really had trouble figuring out my notes” or “I was pretty nervous - I could tell my voice was shaky” or “I said ‘um’ and ‘er’ all the time - I know that sounds bad to the audience as it makes me seem unsure of what I am saying”. It is interesting to note that even beginning students are quite competent at monitoring their output and, consequently, they are generally aware of the problem areas (Schweda Nicholson 1991). At times, however, trainees are not completely sure of how to solve the problems they have identified. This ability develops with practice over time.

(2) After linguistic matters, content and demeanor have been discussed by the student interpreter, then it is time for the trainee’s classmates to offer their feedback. Very often, they can assist by providing the correct or missing information mentioned by the interpreter during her or his personal, introspective evaluation or offer a positive comment about a strong (albeit nervous) voice which projects well. During this interactive period between students, the instructor should guide the discussion and tactfully resolve any disputes but should, as much as possible, allow the debriefing to proceed among the trainees only. This is an excellent way for them to become accustomed to offering and accepting criticism, and will assist them during future critique sessions.

(3) It is only after the student interpreter and her or his classmates have finished their critique that the instructor should step in. It is then her or
his role to bring up any other linguistic, content and/or demeanor points worthy of mention.

(4) After the instructor has made some additional remarks, then the expert is allowed the final word. It is rare that there are still trouble spots or great successes to be mentioned after the critique cycle of (a) student interpreter, (b) classmates, and (c) instructor. At times, though, the expert may say "you didn't mention this or that". At this point, it is the instructor's role to ask the students whether they would consider the information mentioned a serious omission. It is almost without exception that critical material which was not included in the trainee interpreter's rendition has already been addressed by the other students or the instructor. Rating omissions on their import and/or seriousness is also excellent training for students, as there are times when the interpreter must make judgments about primary, secondary, and tertiary information, such as when the speaker asks for a five-minute summary of a twenty-minute speech. It should be stressed once again that students must learn to critique themselves and others by following the teacher's example. Therefore, the cycle outlined in this section should be followed initially with detailed guidance and feedback from the instructor, and then evolve to include the students as well.

IV. Student Reactions to the Constructive Criticism Model

Student response to the constructive criticism model has been overwhelmingly positive. Trainees are actively involved in the learning process and often find that they can identify with many of their peers' problems as well. It is the author's experience that students become better interpreters as a result of this technique. Inasmuch as they are challenged to analyze their own behavior and that of their classmates, they become more aware of personal strengths and weaknesses. Class periods are characterized by lively discussions. A certain closeness and feeling of camaraderie develop as the training period progresses. Since students become accustomed to evaluating the performance of their classmates and being critiqued themselves by their peers, they have a better understanding of the interpretation process and a myriad of perspectives to draw upon when a problem presents itself. Students are constantly encouraged to discover novel solutions to time-worn problems and, in turn, to approach uncommon or highly specialized problems by calling upon the wealth and breadth of their common knowledge along with their finely-tuned analytical talents. By the end of the training period, students are ready to take on the interpreting world, for they will carry these skills with them into the professional marketplace. Moreover, their abilities will undoubtedly have a positive effect in other areas of endeavor. In this connection, many former students have told the author that the mental acuity, versatility, short-term memory capacity, listening facility and organizational competence learned during the course of interpreter training have influenced and assisted them in all aspects of their lives.

V. Conclusion

This paper has proposed the constructive criticism model for student interpreter feedback and debriefing. Characterized by "criticism with kindness", this approach stresses trainee involvement and instructor guidance during critique sessions. Students are not only encouraged to identify their own mistakes as well as those of their classmates, but are required to approach errors of form and substance from an analytical perspective. Trainees' skills are continuously strengthened throughout their course of study.

The teaching techniques outlined here have been used successfully by the author for the past eleven years. It is hoped that other interpreter trainers will consider incorporating the proposed methodology into their curriculum. Experience has shown that instructors and students alike benefit from the constructive criticism model.

References


Harrap's Modern College French and English
