The Acquisition of Interpreting Skills

Barbara Moser-Mercer
Ecole de Traduction et d'Interpétation, Université de Genève

Abstract

For the purpose of teaching interpreting it is useful to proceed from the very basic assumption that what has not been understood can for the most part not be correctly interpreted. Most students exhibit some weaknesses in their working languages, and particularly in their passive languages, be they signed or oral languages. As a result, training should focus first and foremost on honing comprehension skills before expecting the student to execute simultaneously all parts of the interpreting process. This requires, on the one hand, a solid understanding of the interpreting process itself, its chronology and simultaneity, as well as the way in which resources are allocated, and, on the other, how novices approach complex cognitive skills, such as interpreting. This article argues for a systematic initiation to the interpreting skill that reflects the cognitive requirements of novices on their way to becoming experts.

Introduction

Much has already been written about the complexity of the interpreting process (Gerver 1976, Moser-Mercer 1997; see Gile 1995 for a review of the relevant literature), whether between oral languages or between oral and signed languages. I therefore proceed on the assumption that the relevant literature is known; this article therefore focuses on the practical needs of the interpreting teacher in designing an introductory course to simultaneous interpreting between oral or oral and signed languages. Much of what will be touched upon here can be applied mutatis mutandis to an introductory course in consecutive interpreting as well.

Preparatory steps

Before students ever set foot in an interpreting booth or before they are called upon to interpret simultaneously, they must have an understanding of both the situational context in which interpreting usually takes place and of the process of interpreting. A balanced approach, with neither the situational context nor the
process variables being emphasized at the expense of the other, should provide
the student with the necessary contextual knowledge and understanding of what
he is called upon to do. Telling a student to interpret what he hears, throwing
him into the situation cold to see what will happen, is certainly not conducive to
developing professional expertise. A student can be spared much frustration if
he has at least a casual understanding of the intricacies of listening and speaking
at the same time, of comprehending complex arguments while engaged in
producing natural-sounding prose. Making him aware of how noise of any kind,
whether true noise from the environment, or white noise in the psychological
sense, can impair performance, provides further reassurance to the budding
interpreter, that he need not be able to cope with any and all difficulties right
from the start. Allowing him to familiarize himself with the equipment, hearing
his own voice in his headset, listening and speaking/signing at the same time,
are all designed to help him overcome initial difficulties.

Simultaneous interpreting

A good introductory course needs to be based on a thorough understanding of
the cognitive skills involved. These include, but are not limited to,
comprehension skills (reasoning skills and skills of message reconstruction),
memory skills (declarative and procedural), and workload management skills
(sharing and/or shifting attention from one part of the process to another).

Simultaneous interpreting is first and foremost a matter of comprehending
an incoming message. Without some level of comprehension, there will be no
felicitous reproduction of the message in the target language (this article
presupposes excellent proficiency in the students' active and passive languages).
While Dillinger (1994) found no differences in the comprehension skills of
bilinguals and professional interpreters, the interpreting teacher is faced, time
and again, with students commenting on their not having "heard" a segment of
the original. Thus, it appears that novices need to develop their comprehension
skills in a way that facilitates identification of main points and weeding out of
redundancy. This skill of selective listening may very well already be developed
in bilinguals (in the sense of Grosjean 1985), but certainly needs further honing.

In order to guide students through an introductory course in simultaneous
interpreting we thus need to manipulate the input material in a way that allows
us to maintain progression and helps the student develop his comprehension
skills in a setting that requires a simultaneity of tasks. Input material is thus the
variable to be manipulated carefully.

Starting out with a simple schema, such as a fairy tale familiar to the
students, ensures that students know the story line – thus do not have to shift all
of their attention to figuring out the gist of the message – and helps with natural
production in the target language: most students will have read or retold the fairy tales themselves at one time or another. Students usually feel no need to be close to the source language structure.

At the next level of difficulty, we could have students prepare short improvised speeches on topical issues. Before students interpret, the class needs to prepare the knowledge base: which current event is being discussed, how does the press write it up, which are the key ideas, proper names, dates, etc. The student enters the booth with his declarative knowledge base ready to process the incoming information. Students learn to listen for ideas, chunk information, and – since speeches are very improvised – make use of redundancy.

This could be followed by student speeches on non-topical issues. Again, the class prepares the declarative knowledge base and once in the booth, students reinforce listening for ideas – made somewhat more difficult by the fact that the arguments are not as familiar as in the previous exercise. Thus students need to experiment with variable distance from the original – lagging further behind when novel ideas are presented, being able to stay closer when the material is more familiar.

Presenting students with descriptions of familiar objects, offered visually at the same time, helps students develop hypotheses and anticipate information the speaker will present as he "walks" students through the description of these objects. Again, students have to prepare the knowledge base – any technical terms that might crop up – before entering the booth.

At this point students have had occasion to develop their comprehension skills in a variety of ways – dealing with the familiar (considerable anticipation, little monitoring) to the less familiar (experimenting with lag, eliminating redundancy in improvised speeches), working on hypothesis-building (monitoring) – while never being pushed beyond "their limits". It is of paramount importance at this initial stage (and of course at any stage thereafter), that students' production sounds as natural in the target language as possible; this objective is achieved by preparing the declarative knowledge base before every exercise, by providing systematic progression in input material which ensures that students move from one distinct level of proficiency to the next, without being forced to accomplish the impossible. All material is improvised, and remains so for a considerable time, since redundancy is of considerable importance in maintaining natural delivery. The moment input material is dense, students resort to "surface structure interpreting" (or form-based interpreting as Isham described it; Isham 1994).

At this stage it would be useful to introduce students to argumentative material. Understanding points of view, discovering a speaker's slant should already have been part and parcel of good introductory teaching in consecutive. These skills come in handy in simultaneous, when there is less time to discern
differences in points of view. Again, students develop the declarative knowledge base – who thinks what and why – and by the time they get to the booth, they will know how to listen for clues to identifying different arguments. Already from consecutive they should have a sound understanding of the use of logical connectives in discourse and can thus build on this skill. Argumentative speeches allow students to discover the use of their voice for emphasis and meaning transfer.

After students feel comfortable with the above exercises, the time has come to increase the difficulty of the input material by reducing the time for declarative memory preparation, or by choosing less familiar subjects, reducing the level of redundancy in the original, and ultimately by increasing speaking speed. None of this should be done without having ensured that the students have indeed mastered the skill at the previous level.

Feedback

Perhaps contrary to popular belief, feedback from teacher to student is of lesser importance at this stage than eliciting feedback from students about the difficulties they encountered with each and every exercise. I have found it useful to obtain this feedback in writing, with students jotting down short comments after each exercise and before the general class discussion. This allows me to see first-hand what each student experienced in the booth and before he might be influenced by what his colleagues are saying. Such a "journal" helps the teacher understand a student's specific problems, see progress when it occurs, and provides the student with an invaluable record of how far he has come. Going back over this record with the student provides an excellent context within which a teacher can set his comments and ensure that these are pertinent and not removed from the student's true difficulties.

Conclusion

This brief description of an introductory course in simultaneous interpreting emphasizes the importance of a step-like approach to the acquisition of a complex skill. By manipulating one variable – the input material – students are able to practice the skill in its entirety, while the teacher can still control the development of workload management skills, without ever having to resort to artificial exercises that are far removed from interpreting in a natural setting. Breaking down the skill in individual components does not mean that the student is forced to practice on subcomponents of a skill and at some point is asked to "put it all together". Our understanding of the development of expertise
has improved, so that we can recreate the various stages novices go through on their way to becoming experts (Künzli & Moser-Mercer, 1995), provide the right kind of progression and manipulate variables that implicate the required skill components when needed.

References


