

LETTERS TO THE EDITORS

Dear Editors,

Let me begin with warmest thanks for the opportunity, through the Interpreters' Newsletter, to learn what other professional colleagues are doing in the field of interpreter training. I am writing in response to one of the questions on which you have called for discussion: is shadowing really a useful introductory exercise for simultaneous? No, it is not. Shadowing is not only not a useful introductory exercise, it is a totally counter-productive introduction to conference interpretation. Christopher Thiéry hits the nail on the head in the 1989 Newsletter calling it a "potentially harmful exercise". The harm is not only potential, it is real and it is often irreversible.

This raises three questions: first, what's wrong with shadowing at the beginning of an interpreting course? Second, if it's wrong, then how did this "pernicious" exercise (to quote another teaching colleague) ever get let into the classroom? And, third, can we say anything positive about shadowing? I believe we can, incidentally, but much later in the training (not propedeutically) and for an altogether different purpose. But more on that later.

First comes the "What's Wrong With Shadowing" question. Well, as a profession we seem to agree that our job is to transmit to the listener what Seleskovitch calls the "vouloir dire", that is the speaker's meaning and intent. The professional literature makes it clear that, as such, "interpreting" should not be confused with "transcoding" which we also do but only when we have to or when we are tired and have lost our concentration. Now there are various forms of shadowing, they are extensively described in the literature and they all boil down to this: to shadow is to repeat words - words in a text, words in sentences or words on a list. The definition of shadowing is to repeat words verbatim. And that's not at all what we conference interpreters do!

"How did shadowing get into the beginning curriculum"? Since the 1960s experimental researchers from several social science and scientific disciplines have been "studying" conference interpreters. Their research focuses on Information Processing and they have been studying us specifically to learn more about dual tasking.

It should perhaps be noted that experimental research follows an established scientific method. Remember "Introduction to Psychology"? Control groups and experimental groups? For their experimental group the researchers wanted to work with conference interpreters, non-interpreters with the same language levels would form the control group. When professional conference interpreters were available for testing, things were fine, and very interesting. Unfortunately, we weren't always around in statistically significant numbers, and so the researchers soon did the next best thing. To quote from "Psych 101", "the most available testing populations are white rats and university students". The experimenters turned to students about to graduate from recognized interpreting schools.

So far so good. You could argue, of course, about the value of testing brand new interpreters, but that is not my point here. By the mid-1970s at least one of the prime testers was already protesting that a two-pronged (listening and speaking) test model of cognition was misleadingly simplistic. But again, that is neither here nor there for the present discussion. What is relevant is that the experimenters now needed a new control group to match the new (student) experimental group. So whom did they pick? Well, who would you pick if you had to match variables? You'd select students with the same languages in the same program, but having no experience of simultaneous interpretation. You'd have to pick a pre-interpreter group of students. And that's how it happened.

Perhaps it was inevitable that a tool designed for experimental testing would quickly catch on as a pedagogical tool once it had been introduced to the pre-interpreting group. By 1970 (I remember it well!) shadowing and other such exercises had become standard propedeutic practice at many institutions. Unfortunately, it is precisely there, at the beginning of training, that shadowing can do the most harm!

Beginning students of simultaneous interpretation are already anxiously inclined to stick far too closely to the speaker's exact words and phrasing. If we reinforce this natural inclination by teaching them, first, to parrot words, there is a very good chance that we will wind up with parrots. For a habit, any habit, once

learned is unlearned only with the greatest difficulty. It has been my experience in over eight years as an interpreter trainer that students who have developed a "stick close to the words" approach require an unusually high degree of personal motivation and maturity to master a Conference Interpreting approach. Psychology 103: "untraining a bad habit is highly frustrating for both trainee and trainer".

"Yes, but," I've been told on more than one occasion, "we do tell our students that this is just a test, or this is just to get them used to speaking and listening simultaneously; it is not part of their real training, and they must not interpret this way in the profession." Come again? I am reminded of an argument advanced quite seriously in the mid-1970s at a graduate course in Applied Linguistics. In the '70s the psycholinguists had been modeling Early Language Acquisition skills in children and had noticed that children invariably say things wrong before they get them quite right. From which their colleagues in Applied Linguistics deduced that they should first teach second-language learners wrong forms ("me go away") before gradually introducing the correct forms. Not surprisingly, language scores did not noticeably improve.

I had a third question: can we say anything positive about shadowing as an interpreter training exercise? Yes, absolutely! I have found shadowing and variations of shadowing immensely helpful toward the very end of training, for students who are doing excellent analytical work, have good language and show true potential but whose halting delivery hampers easy listening. I have run a number of "one-on-one" shadowing sessions with such students, first monolingually in the A-language, eventually from B-A. I have done this with only 4 students, all of them about to graduate, and of course there was no control group. But in all four cases the students' private feedback as well as their subsequent professional careers as conference interpreters demonstrate the potential of this technique.

And finally, based on an on-going case study, I would suggest that shadowing may prove immensely useful as a "language-enhancement" tool. But that takes us out of the domain of interpreter-training to the quite different area of language enhancement and language activation.

Ine Van Dam (Institute of International Studies, Monterey).

Dear Editors,

This really is a letter addressed to novice interpreters and interpretation students on what I shall simply call "red carpet problems". I bet there were two dreams you had while studying at an interpreting school: first, a beach of white sand, lined with palm trees, with a luxury hotel in the background; in that hotel you'd be working at an international conference of oil-tycoons. The second dream was about a high-level conference, behind closed and grimly guarded doors, in one of the nerve-centres of the world (Number 10, the Elysée, the White House...), while the fate of our planet, or at least of Europe, was hanging in the balance.

Sorry to disappoint you. Chances are that the tycoons will not need interpretation, and as for the big shot meetings, well... they do exist, and often need interpreters. No reason why you shouldn't be selected for one of them, only - hold it for a moment. You're not there yet. Many dangers lurk in the shadows, before you can sit down at one of those mahogany tables. Let me describe some of them.

Governments resigning

Ministers (and Commissioners) come and go, interpreters stay on. Rather gratifying for your ego, but sometimes you'll wish that those ministers would resign a couple of weeks later. Because this is what may well happen: the day before you're scheduled to work at one of those meetings, you hear something on the radio in the morning about a wayward statement by the defence minister of the country in question. At lunchtime, the Prime Minister will cover his colleague, and the coalition partners meet to try and patch it over. In the meantime it's time for you to go to the airport. Will there still be a government by the time you arrive? Chances are that, once the ball starts rolling, the whole thing will be called off at the last minute and all you can do is return your air ticket to the travel office.

Strikes

Airlines, air traffic control, trains, ships/ferries, urban transport, taxis: however justified the claims of these people may be, it means that you will either not leave at all or your "mission" will be extremely uncomfortable. A strike in the hotel or catering industries is no pleasure either - you may have to make your bed, wash your socks, and scrounge for food, but at least "the show will go on".

Illness

Not yours, God forbid, but suppose one VIP, into whose ear you're supposed to whisper, catches a serious cold. Surprising, actually, since these people have admirable stamina: they meet in Brussels on Monday/Tuesday, in Luxemburg the following weekend, and in between (while you're doing routine meetings) they accompany their heads of state to Djakarta or Lima. But sometimes a virus scores a hit and as a result the meeting is postponed. That is either postponed to a date for which you've just been granted annual leave or the proposed meeting will have been overtaken by events and will therefore never take place.

Foul weather

Who has not been sitting, disconsolate, at London or Milan airport, fogbound in November or February? Fortunately severe earthquakes are rare in Europe, but floods do occur and hurricanes, typhoons, etc. are no longer confined to exotic countries, they even occur in London. Heavy snowfall may also place a white blanket on the mission you've been awaiting for years.

Assassination

Isn't this going too far, you'll ask. Well, it does happen, albeit not very often. Of course it will put a hat on your mission and you may consider yourself lucky that you were not sitting in a car next to the man in question.

It must be added, on the macabre subject of death, that the "Great Terminator" does not necessarily mean a reduction in interpreting activity. It may sound cynical but you may one day listen to (and interpret) the following conversation: "I'll send off a note to the Indonesian government to tell them that we do not agree at all with their latest declaration, and how concerned we are. Better still, the King of Ruritania is dying and the Indonesian foreign minister is sure to come to the funeral. I can talk to him personally there."

By now you'll be wondering whether those exciting "missions" you were dreaming about do take place. Well, in spite of the pitfalls, they do take place, exactly as you see them on TV, with red carpets, closed doors, and - most important - interpretation, and I'm sure that one day you'll take part in one of them. Bon voyage! - **DaVIDE Reinert (Former Permanent Interpreter of the Commission of the EC).**