

# Multilingual mock conferences: a valuable tool in the training of conference interpreters

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## Abstract

*This article considers multilingual mock conferences as a pedagogical tool in the training of conference interpreters, and examines the case of Heriot-Watt University's mock conferences. This activity draws on theories of situated and experiential learning by Kolb (1984), Brown et al. (1989), Lave/Wenger (1991) and Kolb/Kolb (2005) and builds up on existing research by Ardito (1999), Kurz (2003), De Laet (2010), Alexeeva/Shutova (2011), Xiangdong (2015).*

*A study was carried out with M.A. and MSc<sup>1</sup> Conference Interpreting students over two academic years. These students take part in weekly simulations of multilingual conferences which bring together all language combinations taught across the programme. Students were invited to reflect upon this experience and its learning benefits as part of their training. The study was also aimed at fostering a reflection on good practice in training on their part (Sawyer 1994 and Gile 2009, 2013), by drawing their attention to the use of peer-learning strategies (Boud et al. 2001). The mixed-method approach used for this study focuses on students' perception of the activity, and on the challenges and benefits of taking part in an interpreting task where trainee interpreters do not have a working knowledge of all the languages involved.*

1 Heriot-Watt University offers a 4-year undergraduate M.A. programme in translation and conference interpreting, during which students start consecutive interpreting in year 2 and simultaneous in year 4, and a 1-year intensive postgraduate MSc programme in conference interpreting.

## Keywords

Simultaneous interpreting, training, situated and experiential learning, peer-learning, mock conferences.

## Introduction

Academics designing conference interpreting programmes often face a key challenge, flagged by Xiangdong (2015: 326), namely that: “internship opportunities are limited”. To address this issue, the training conference interpreters receive needs to feature experiences designed to raise students’ awareness of their future working conditions and environment, either by taking students out of the classroom (Chouc/Conde 2016) or by creating as authentic an experience as possible in an adjusted learning environment. A number of learning and teaching strategies can be used, and this study proposes to describe and explore one of them: multilingual mini-conferences or mock conferences (MCs). They will be considered as one element of the training of conference interpreters, drawing on the data collected from the experience of two cohorts of M.A. and MSc students from Heriot-Watt University (22 participants in 2014-2015 and 21 participants in 2015-2016). This study complements existing research on the learning benefits of relay interpreting which was based on the same cohorts’ experience of MCs. During these MCs, students encounter for the first time a genuine audience, although not in a genuine conference setting; they also experience an authentic interpreting community of practice, meaning that for instance, when a speech is delivered in Chinese as part of the MC, the students working from Chinese into English have a genuine audience around the table. Additionally, this set-up also enables students to get a first-hand experience of relay interpreting (Chouc/Conde 2018). They know that their fellow interpreting students in the booths are depending on their interpreting to provide relay into other languages such as French, German, Spanish, Arabic or British Sign Language.

The use of simulated, multilingual mock conferences is embedded in the curriculum of M.A. and MSc students during the final stage of their conference interpreting programme of studies at Heriot-Watt University. This is part of a comprehensive situated learning strategy devised to enable students to develop a solid awareness of professional practice, challenges and expectations, as well as acquiring conference interpreting techniques. Although this practice is often used in one shape or another by institutions training conference interpreters, there is a limited amount of research on its benefits to date. De Laet (2010: 254) describes MCs, highlighting the situated learning dimension of staging a simulation replicating the different stages of a conference rather than using speeches out of context, and Xiangdong (2015) presents a similar process designed to make students experience and reflect upon the various forms of communication one faces when interpreting at an event, rather than working on just one given speech. These models, however, describe settings in which all the students taking part in mock conferences have similar language combinations, while

the model studied in this article places students in a multilingual setting, as explained above. In the mock conferences considered, students not only provide interpreting but also experience interpreting as pure users, thus engaging in a more comprehensive learning experience. This additional aspect complements the more standard format of conference interpreting classes, in which “all participants understand the two languages being used, without the real need for overcoming language barriers for communication” (Lee in Xiangdong, 2015: 326). It also mirrors a number of professional settings, particularly common in international institutions, in which a large number of languages are used, or “in multilingual conferences in countries where most interpreters have only two working languages”, as highlighted by Shlesinger (2010: 276).

Besides, the MCs studied in this experiment were designed with situated learning in mind, following Kolb’s statement that: “Knowledge is continuously derived from and tested out in the experiences of the learner” (Kolb 1984: 27). The purpose of these mock conferences is, therefore, to create the experience of this community of practice described by Lave and Wenger (1991: 53), crucial to the learning process: this “serves a bridge between classroom realism and professional realism, paving the way for the trainees to enter the industry” (Xiangdong 2015: 328). MCs create a valuable situation for an interpreting trainee, in which

s/he acquires the skill to perform by actually engaging in the process, under the attenuated conditions of *legitimate peripheral participation*. This central concept denotes the particular mode of engagement of a learner who participates in the actual practice of an expert, but only to a limited degree and with limited responsibility for the ultimate product as a whole (Lave/Wenger 1991: 14).

This pressure or responsibility is alleviated by the lack of summative assessment on this specific task and this situation creates a context favourable to another dimension of situated learning: the autonomous and collaborative phase (Brown *et al.* 1989). This kind of task leads students to a stage when “students no longer behave as students, but as practitioners, and develop their conceptual understanding through social interaction and collaboration in the culture of the domain, not of the school” (Brown *et al.* 1989: 40). It is also consistent with the need for an apprenticeship model, highlighted by Sachtleben in her research on the multilingual classroom (Sachtleben 2015: 51-59), and it echoes Gillies’ recommendations: conference interpreting students should “practice in groups”, “listen to each other” and “work with listeners who need interpretation” (Gillies 2013: 13-14). In such a context, students are exposed to prepared speeches as well as spontaneous interventions, a crucial part of the training highlighted by Ardito (1999). They take on the role of speakers regularly, revisiting the experience from different perspectives through the cycle of MCs. Spontaneous interventions are more difficult to include in a standard interpreting classroom model, but during MCs, students are faced with unscripted challenges, thus creating settings that match Lave’s concept on experience as a learning tool (1988). This type of experience makes learners realise the benefit of “[engaging] in authentic activity using the context in which an issue emerged to help find a solution” (Brown *et al.* 1989: 35). The use of authentic experience is also described as beneficial and

constructive (Alexeeva/Shutova 2010 and Kurz 2002), because students are exposed to genuine conference communication dynamics. They have to come up with strategies to cope with what Ardito (1999: 188) calls “pragmatic aspects of orality and interlinguistic communication”.

This “exposure interpreting method” (Alexeeva/Shutova 2010) enables students to learn from “immersion in authentic professional situations followed by self-reflection/analysis, but also from a process of collective reflection – with multiple and reciprocal feedback – involving all those taking part in the taught sessions”, described by Perez and Wilson (2011: 251) in the context of public service interpreter training. Adopting situated learning strategies to train conference interpreters is also consistent with what Gonzalez-Davies/Enriquez-Raido (2016: 9) recommend when they describe the use of experience in which: “the main aim is to reproduce the professional context in a community of practice that includes academic scaffolding and/or any of the teaching methods indicated above”.

In addition, MCs create a community of practice, similar to the ones studied by Lave/Wenger (1991), but this particular model differs slightly from what they describe in that there is no direct master-learner relationship here: all the interpreting is provided by interpreting trainees, for interpreting trainees; trainers merely observe or contribute as speakers, they do not model the skill trainees are developing. All interpreters are therefore on a par: they are all trainees, at a similar stage of the training process, and they need to collaborate.

As such, the relay interpreting dimension of mock conferences creates an interesting peer-learning situation as well as an experiential learning context, albeit didactic, following concepts highlighted by Hara (2009) and Boud *et al.* (2014). To achieve the research objective, this study explores more specifically the perceived learning benefits of a situation in which students “share the status as fellow learners and they are accepted as such” (Boud *et al.* 2014: 4). Through this experiment, we are proposing to explore the view that “Reciprocal peer learning emphasizes students’ simultaneous learning and contributes to other students’ learning” (*ibid.*) applied to conference interpreting training, looking at this particular setup, in which students depend on each other to complete the task at hand.

To explore the benefits of placing trainee conference interpreters in a situation mirroring a professional multilingual conference setting, in which they have a genuine audience and rely on each other’s performance to be able to participate, the study focused more specifically on the following aspects:

- the impact of MCs on student motivation;
- the lessons students have drawn in terms of pace management and interpreting technique in such a situation;
- their understanding of the importance of delivery following MCs;
- the impact such an experience has had on their preparation practice and their awareness of booth management;
- how taking part in MCs has affected students’ views on cooperation and good practice in a conference interpreting setting.

The outcome of such a study can be used to better inform curriculum design and students’ training through situated learning experiences for interpreting train-

ing, and the conclusions on the impact of this type of situated learning strategy can lead to the development of similar experiences in other fields, for instance in translation training: one could create a fictive scenario, in which students would tackle a mock professional projet, playing the parts of a client, project manager, translation team, editing team and proof-readers. This model could also be easily applied to business studies, or any field in which students are developing specific professional skills and will be called to interact with a range of stakeholders.

## 1. The study

As part of their training, students enrolled on the M.A. and MSc in Conference Interpreting at Heriot-Watt University are trained through language-specific classes, focused on one language combination. During these, students will either deliver a live performance or work in individual booths, getting feedback from their lecturers/trainers and/or peers. It is possible to stage a pure user experience for consecutive interpreting by ensuring the designated pure user leaves the room during the delivery of the source speech, but not so for simultaneous since in this type of class setup, users understand both the source speech and interpreting provided by their peers and can generally hear both. Although this aspect of the teaching model is rarely formulated explicitly in studies on conference interpreting pedagogy, it often underpins the conference interpreting teaching classroom model described for instance by Gile (1999).

So to address the limits of language combination-specific classes, all M.A. and MSc conference interpreting students enrolled at Heriot-Watt take part in a series of weekly mock conferences. These sessions bring together all the students registered on the same programme, and a multilingual mock debate is staged over a period of 2 to 3 hours, around a current issue relevant for all languages represented. The MC topics are selected to ensure that various points of view can be featured and lead to a proper debate. These MCs are not open to the public, though visiting lecturers often attend and participate in various capacities; the audience usually only includes members of staff and the interpreting students themselves.

The interpreting required to enable communication in MCs is carried out by students, in consecutive and simultaneous modes. These MCs are organised in the later part of students' training, to ensure that they have built up the required skills and have the linguistic competency to tackle simultaneous interpreting. So for M.A. students, it means that these sessions take place during the second part of Semester 1 and at the start of Semester 2 of their final year of study; these students focused on liaison interpreting and consecutive interpreting in year 2, spent year 3 abroad and receive an intensive refresher on consecutive skills before starting simultaneous. In total, M.A. students take part in a minimum of 6 MCs. For their part, MSc students who follow an intensive 12 months programme start MCs in Semester 2. In some cases, MSc students' first introduction to conference interpreting techniques was when they started the programme, hence a later introduction of the activity for these cohorts. For M.A. MCs, members of staff play the roles of chair and formal speakers; all students who are sitting around the table have to participate as delegates. They are encouraged to play a character with

a profile relevant to the debate when taking part in the discussions. MSc students take on all of these different roles during the course of the MCs, acting in turn as chair, speaker, or even just as delegate, as the post-graduate course has been designed to feature a more in-depth reflexion on professional practice in conference contexts. This rotation of roles is designed to help students increase their understanding of the challenges interpreters face. Staff attend these sessions to provide feedback during the debriefing at the end, and students are provided with guidance on how to provide peer-assessment and how to self-assess as well.

Through these sessions, students experience a fully multilingual, almost real-life-like setting, difficult to stage in language-specific classes. These MCs give students an opportunity to collaborate with peers who have a different language combination and it creates a need to actively listen to fellow students to follow the full event, enabling students to approach interpreting from a new perspective. It is in fact this collaborative aspect which makes MCs particularly valuable as a component of conference interpreting training.

## 2. Research methodology

The study was carried out over a period of two years in order to collect data from a significant pool of participants, thus building on Xiangdong's (2015) experiment. A total of 43 students completed the questionnaires (22 for the first cohort, 21 for the second) and 32 students volunteered to take part in the interviews. All language combinations taught at Heriot-Watt University were represented in the questionnaires and interviews, thus creating an illustrative sample. The experiment targeted two cohorts of M.A and MSc students who had all received a similar training in conference interpreting, which includes all the principles laid out by Gile (2009)<sup>2</sup>. At this stage of their training, both groups have studied the key concepts and theoretical framework of conference interpreting practice, and they have also had ample training and practice in consecutive interpreting, and a solid introduction to simultaneous interpreting in class.

A mixed-method approach was used to collect the data: the quantitative part of the study was carried out using short questionnaires which were made available, on paper and online, to reach out to as many students as possible. The qualitative part of the data collection encompassed more in-depth interviews in which students participated on a voluntary basis.

The questionnaires were based on a series of statements which participants were asked to rate, using Likert scales, from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree), following Sachtleben's model (2015), to make it fairly easy and quick for

- 2 Gile's Effort Model of Simultaneous Interpreting (2009:167-175) identifies the skills trainees need to master for simultaneous interpreting: Listening and Analysis, Short-term memory Effort and Speech production Effort, as well as Coordination Effort. Gile also considers problem triggers, failure sequences and anticipation, and suggests exercises to enable learners to test their skills and gradually build up their proficiency towards this Effort Model. MCs are designed to combine all these challenges and foster a reflexive approach to simultaneous interpreting practice.

students to engage with this study. Interviews were filmed, with the students' consent.

The MC<sup>3</sup> experience incorporates French, Spanish, German and BSL at M.A. level, and French, German, Spanish, Arabic and Chinese at MSc level. Thus, all students experience conference interpreting as pure users at some point, and practice either consecutive or simultaneous facing what Alexeeva and Shutova (2011: 14) call “the stress of working in front of a real audience”. The significance of working in as authentic a setting as possible is also stressed by Kurz (1989, 2002); Thiéry (1990); Sawyer (2004); De Laet (2010); Setton (2010) and Gillies (2013) to name a few.

### 3. Data and Analysis

The data collected through the questionnaires and interviews lead to a number of findings in the shape of percentages and observations respectively. Three clear key aspects stood out and have been used to organise the data. They range from students' awareness of the task at hand (considered in 4.1) to their perception of core interpreting skills (in 4.2). It was also clear that participation in the experiment led to reflections on professional practice and even the development of a model of good practice, two aspects considered in points 4.3 and 4.4.

#### 3.1 Awareness of conference interpreting

##### *The overall experience*

It appears that a vast majority of the interviewees considered mock conferences to be a fundamental element in their training as conference interpreters. When asked to rate from 1 to 5 – 1 being “I strongly agree” and 5 being “I strongly disagree” – the statement “The mini-conference experience has helped me understand how to get the best of my interpreting training” in the questionnaires, 88.7% of them stated that they strongly or partially agreed.

Then during the interviews, all students, without exceptions, reiterated that MCs are a very useful, valuable and beneficial learning experience. This is exemplified by the following statement made by participant 4, who noted that: “the miniconf is a real context and it forces you to practice and because you have other people relying on you, you can't choose to have a bad day, you have to play well”. When looking more closely at answers in the open-ended questions in the questionnaires and at the observations made by students during interviews, it was clear that participating in MCs led students to pay more attention to their performance, while also contributing to their motivation.

<sup>3</sup> Note that these MCs are known by staff and students as “mini-conferences”.

Students find mini-conferences challenging but spontaneously 50% of them mention in their first answer that MCs represent the closest possible experience to a real-life setting, showing a clear understanding of the purpose of such a challenge. Additionally, as respondent 5 reflected during the interview, “[they] realize [they] have to keep going because, otherwise, communication is broken” and they know how challenging it is when for instance they themselves rely on a colleague for relay interpreting or simply need the interpreters to follow the discussion. Moreover, another student sums up what MCs mean for them: “Before MCs we knew theoretically what it would be like to be in a conference. You know how it affects your interpreting and how you might get around something or how you have to improve your interpreting so the others can rely on you” (respondent 3). The benefits of MCs are identified by respondents in terms of student confidence and their perceived performance and progression, as is exemplified by the following answer: “Miniconfs really helped me to improve quite rapidly. I got 4/5 speeches one after the other and also the interventions afterwards so you get a feel of what it is really like as opposed to when you are in class in the booths where you don’t feel as much pressure” (respondent 13). Building on the model described by Kurz (2002), respondent 23 notes: “When we do consecutive interpreting in class it’s often a video which is useful too but, having the person there you can see the mannerisms, their pace is more adapted to the conference so I really enjoy seeing the person, having eye contact with them. That really helps me”.

In pedagogical terms, MCs create a valuable opportunity for self-assessment as highlighted by the following idea expressed by interviewee 12: “MCs are very difficult but good to see your exact level”. Students are provided with self-assessment sheets and encouraged to record their performance during MCs, to then critically assess their performance. Direct peer feedback is also a clear way for students to gauge their performance, as the room layout gives them a direct, visual contact with their listeners (colleagues taking relay and staff and student playing the part of delegates around the table). As interviewee 14 added: “You have to keep going and can’t get stuck”. This is further supported by respondent 26, who stated that “having the chance to be a speaker helps you get in the shoes of people you are working for”. Participants’ remarks validate the use of MCs as a situated learning experience: they show that the process has contributed to a better awareness of their performance and, through reflection, to a clear understanding of the standards they are aiming for.

#### *Impact on student motivation and professional goals*

Mini-conferences also have a positive impact on students in terms of motivation, an idea validated by Xiangdong (2015). Encouragement to perform to a higher level is essential for students: “When I listen to my colleagues, if they are well spoken or they enunciate well, it encourages me to continue with that same emphasis in my speech production, so I can learn from my peers. You have worse or better days, so it is nice to see that it is the same for everyone else. Listening to



my peers really pushes me, especially listening to my friends, which really helps me” (respondent 16).

An additional step in our questionnaire involved asking how the mini-conference experience had affected students’ motivation to become professional interpreters, a recurring topic in the relevant literature (Lin and De Manuel Jerez in Xiangdong 2015: 325-326).

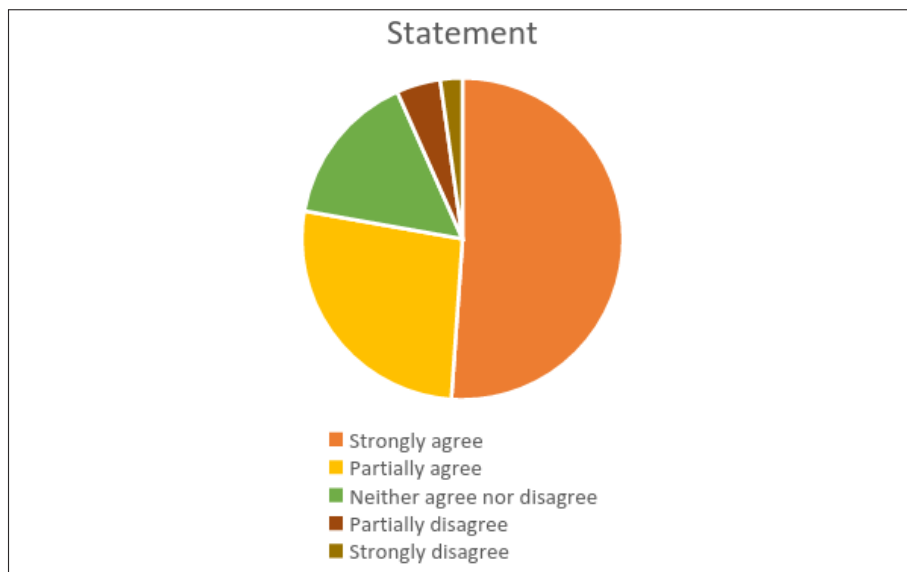


Figure 1: The mini-conference experience has motivated me in my willingness to become a professional conference interpreter.

As illustrated in Figure 1, it is clear that MCs definitely boost students’ determination to become professional interpreters. A significant 77.3% of them strongly or partially agreed that taking part in this type of situated learning activity, designed as a largely student-led exercise, consolidated their determination to become professional interpreters. As Hawtrey (2007: 145) states: “Experiential learning activities also offer a greater chance for students making the link between their studies and their personal goals, such as career or personal skill development”. It is obvious that these students are at a point when they are considering their future professional plans and MCs act as an eye-opening experience, as indicated by respondent 20: “MCs could help you to start in the private market feeling more confident about your interpreting performance”. Respondent 2 elaborates on this, making the connection between MCs and an authentic professional setting: “It’s real, and it feels it is like it would be in the future, should you work as a conference interpreter”. These comments confirm what Xiangdong (2015: 338) established: “though MCs seemed to be challenging tasks, trainees perceived them as good, beneficial and stimulating learning experiences”. Moreover, this is consistent with Kurz’s (1989: 67) statement that “students should undergo training that prepares them for real-life experiences”, a point also made by Ardi-

to (1999: 187), who argued that interpreting training must be designed “as far as possible to reflect real-life conditions”.

After analysing the comments made by respondents, it is clear that situated learning brings about benefits for students and one of them is understanding challenges, more specifically, those they may have to face once they start working in a professional conference interpreting booth.

### 3.2 Understanding core interpreting skills

Participants’ responses in both types of data collected indicate that this experience of MCs has led them to better understand the range of skills they need to master, and to engage in constructive self-assessment in keeping with the principles of a situated learning experiment. More specifically, they referred clearly to core skills like pace-management, preparation and command of the professional booth, and collaboration.

#### *Pace and décalage*

To begin with, we will look into students’ observations about pace and technique. Talking about relay interpreting, respondent 3 said: “It makes you realize your own needs as a language user, so you need the interpreter to keep up the pace, you need them to give you information about things, about a particular culture. So it makes you aware of what you need to provide in your own interpreting”. Similarly, respondent 30 noted: “Pace makes you think about when you are providing [the interpreting]. You learn from things they [your peers] do well if they keep going”. Respondent 22 reflects further on pace-keeping and décalage, comparing practice from the source speech and relay from a pivot interpreter: “[Miniconferences have taught me] how to control my time lag because normally I tend to be too close [to the source speech] and that has helped me to understand I need to wait, to lag behind the interpreter a bit more. If the other interpreter corrects himself, then you have the time to avoid the original mistake”.

Taking part in MCs has led students to analyse the difficulties they encounter and connect experience with theories on interpreting studies. In fact, respondent 12, having noted the issue with coherence, diagnosed her performance and identified what she needed to improve: “longer décalage. Having an idea of the topic allows you to better decipher the message”. Respondent 8 added: “if someone is speaking very slowly, I know that needs to be changed so I try to rephrase to make it sound more dynamic.” These statements demonstrate that through this type of experience, students are able to respond to various real-life-like challenges presented in a conference setting.

Building on the question of pace, participants have reflected on another concern: the need to finish sentences. It seems to be one of the most significant lessons identified by participants: “Trying to give the right pace is important. And trying to finish your sentences because if you don’t have entire sentences, it’s problematic for the others” (respondent 3). Respondent 18 further elaborates: “Don’t start a sentence if you don’t know where it is going”. This point is often

highlighted in class, but MCs lead participants to experience the issues that stem from this type of problem, and they subsequently engage better with the professional practice they are taught.

#### *Preparation, booth strategies and technological competency*

A further learning benefit from participating in MCs is that students realise the benefits of adequate preparation, an aspect which is crucial both for conference interpreting trainees and professional practitioners. Furthermore, students started to reflect on practical aspects of professional practice, such as which tools to bring in the booth and how to use them, as highlighted by respondent 9: “I think I need to prepare the glossary well in advance. I need to tune the channels and I need to give the message in simple language”.

These elements may be subsidiary skills for trainee interpreters but, if students are starting to engage with such considerations at this learning stage, these practical aspects are less likely to become an issue or cause of stress in a professional setting. To take the reflection further, it would be interesting to develop a collaborative research activity to work on a more comprehensive list of good and bad booth practices.

Students have learnt further valuable lessons: “[The mini-conference] gives you a better conception of things to avoid in your own interpreting. It has taught me a good level of self-awareness in terms of booth management and of making sure when the mike is on/off” (respondent 17). This links with Flerov’s (2014) set of recommendations on booth management.

#### *Cooperation and peer support*

A further key element identified by students is cooperation and its benefits, in particular to gain awareness of good, professional practice and delivery. Respondent 2 stated: “You can work in teams, you can listen and you have the chance to perform and get feedback from peers”, articulating clearly the collaborative learning benefits of the experience.

In this regard, the importance of observation is relevant both for students who work with the same language combination, or students who work from a language not understood by the listener, as stressed by Gillies (2013). Thus, MCs place students in a situation where they must cooperate, something which they do not necessarily do in class or in self-study sessions despite being encouraged to do so, as noted by respondent 21: “until we started doing mini-conferences, we hadn’t listened to each other interpreting so that was a good lesson for me or if you noticed that someone was quite nervous when talking, it made you aware of how that comes across so trying to calm yourself down and deliver in a calm fashion that makes sense does help”.

Since participants are still trainees, their delivery as speakers, consecutive interpreters or simultaneous interpreters are not always optimum, but this has actually contributed to their peers’ learning experience. It could also be argued that it also reflects fairly the realities of conference settings, when interpreters are faced with a range of speakers who are not necessarily all used to public speaking

or to being interpreted. Respondent 8 reflected that this diversity of speech delivery types was constructive: “It has taught me to adapt (...). If you are relying on someone sounding anxious, you need to change that and sound calmer”.

Users’ expectations are also significant for respondents: “[the mini-conference] has made me more aware of what is expected. So that has really encouraged me to think about it more seriously and it made us all try our best, it really pushed us. It is helpful to give each other feedback” (respondent 3).

This last comment reinforces another valuable learning outcome identified by participants: peer feedback. Respondent 23 noted: “I find it helpful to get feedback from people listening to me so I learnt a lot about the way I speak”. Likewise, solidarity and empathy are characteristics mentioned by most participants: “You have to be very clear anyway but when you think about your colleagues, you think, I need to do well for them” (respondent 14).

### 3.3 Anticipating the professional context

Engaging in an authentic interpreting experience has also led students to reflect on the “community of practice” described by Lave and Wenger (1991), identifying in particular two aspects of a professional context that may not be so apparent in dual language-combination classes, namely pressure and directionality.

#### *Pressure*

Pressure is one of the aspects that students identified as related to real-life practice, given that it is an experience as close to a real-life setting as possible, and thus conducive to stress, as indicated by Alexeeva and Shutova (2011: 14). Respondent 13 noted: “We get to be put in a real-life situation without the stress of a real job” and respondent 28 further reflected on the learning benefits of this controlled increased pressure: “Sometimes I realize I do better at miniconfs than in class because I have more pressure on my shoulders and because I really need to do well at that time so that gives you a taste of real life”. Students feel stressed because “[their] colleagues and lecturers are listening to [them] but [they] end up getting used to it” (respondent 11), thus showing the benefits of this type of situated learning experience to enable trainees to build coping mechanisms suited to the challenges other than the linguistic aspect of interpreting. Because MCs combine an array of features that resemble the professional world in a very faithful way, students learn to identify aspects of professional practice and articulate a constructive reflection on the pedagogical aspect of such an experience.

#### *Directionality*

Another matter that emerged from the questionnaire completed by students was language directionality. Even though it would be ideal for professional interpreters to work into their native tongue (Lim 2005: 1), the reality is that working into one’s B language is increasingly required of conference interpreters. This developing demand experienced by professionals is reflected in MCs when students need

to work into their B language in order to facilitate communication. Therefore, it is another aspect of the experience which further enhances students' awareness of the challenges and realities of professional practice: the exercise mirrors what they will likely encounter on the market while 22.7% disagree (Figure 2).

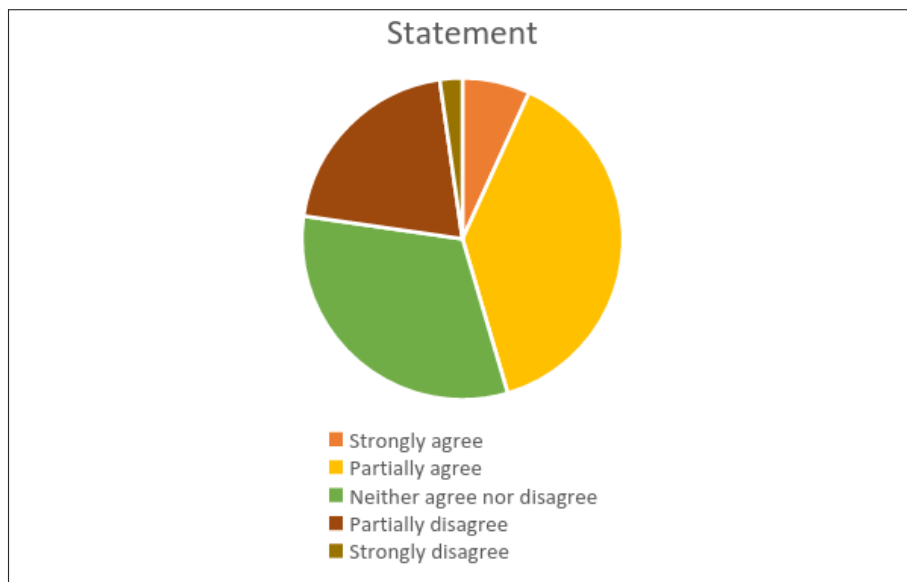


Figure 2: Interpreting into the foreign language means a decrease in quality.

One would expect students to believe that an interpreter performs better into their native language and that was the case in some instances but, surprisingly, several students considered that working into their B language was better because the message is better understood and delivered in simple terms into the B language, as expressed by respondent 31: “Sometimes non-natives make sentences more simple but if you get all the information, that is perfectly right. If the non-native speaker is very clear and sentences are simpler, then it could be easier, but if you don’t understand the accent, the situation gets worse. It depends on the level of the language of the person”. The following answer elaborates on the same idea: “It depends on the person. Sometimes it is very good even when it is not done by a native speaker because they go straight to the point and use less complicated vocabulary” (respondent 17).

However, other students believe that working into their native tongue is “generally better” (respondent 12) because they can focus on “making the message make sense” (respondent 8), and, since they are more proficient in their A language, they generally manage to convey the meaning in a way that is easy to understand. Respondent 19 identifies the simultaneous interpreting level of the interpreter as something more relevant than their level of proficiency in a particular language: “Generally it is easier to have the relay from someone working into their mother tongue because obviously working into your B language is harder. However, the most important is how good the interpreter is more than

the language". Similarly, respondent 27 insists on the interpreting level of the simultaneous interpreting provider: "There are more calques and literal interpretations. Delivery is more stressed into the foreign tongue, they are having to think about what they are reformulating". Respondent 13 goes a step further: "I don't think the message is as clear and concise if they aren't native speakers, if they are not too comfy in that language, they stick too close to their A language".

### 3.4 Towards the articulation of a model of good practice by trainee interpreters

Participants have gained a clear understanding of the consequences of interpreting errors through first-hand experience, and started to formulate in their own words the core aspects of good professional practice during the interview process, showing a shift from practice and observation towards the articulation of a model of good practice to aim for.

While good professional practice is discussed and illustrated at length in class, it is through the experience of MCs that students make these principles their own. For instance respondent 19 stated: "You always have to be switched on because if you muck it up there is going to be a mistake in the next interpretation". This quote illustrates how the trainee starts taking responsibility for their part as an interpreter, through an increased awareness of the consequences of inaccuracy or lack of completeness in a performance, an aspect perhaps less easy to fully grasp during a standard bilingual session during which no relay takes place.

This immersive and authentic experience has also enabled respondent 22 to clearly relate their experience of a multilingual event facilitated by interpreters with the dos and don'ts of professional practice, while reflecting on the learning process such an experience has led to. They stated that: "You have to be as efficient as you can. It makes you more precise and it puts the pressure on you to do well because, if there is no one needing your interpreting services, you just mumble along but with this, you have to keep that professional level, so that has definitely helped". It is apparent that having genuine listeners has led this respondent to assimilate the need for clarity and consistency in their delivery, as well as the importance of stamina, an aspect which is better apprehended in a coherent and uninterrupted simulation like a mock-conference.

Respondent 27 gives a further and interesting insight into the learning outcomes of a realistic multilingual conference, highlighting the benefits of being exposed to the pressure this type of peer-dependent experience creates. This respondent explained: "It [the experience of MCs] has taught me how to cope under pressure. Because you see you are doing something real which is valuable for other people". The respondent clearly relates their learning process to the MC experience and concludes by identifying the same performance criteria an interpreter ought to aim for as respondent 27, stating: "You need to go straight to the point and make it clear. You are producing meaning".

Through participation in this type of situated learning experience, conference interpreting students have started to reflect on a model of good practice towards which they must strive. They are taking ownership of their performance and become fully aware of the consequences of poor or partial interpreting of

the source speeches; they have experienced and overcome the pressure inherent to such a setting through the realisation that their part is crucial in the communication, and they are articulating the key aspects of a good performance based on their experience of their peers' work: efficient, clear, focused on meaning and delivered in an articulate and timely fashion.

Through this situated learning experience, respondents have followed the learning model described by Kolb/Kolb (2005:198), drawing from a concrete experience (the MCs) they have observed in a reflexive way (as illustrated by their comments on their peers' or their own experience of MCs), before formulating abstract concepts (the model of good professional practice and key skills highlighted in the above paragraph). Being able to take part in further MCs then enables them to apply this concept of "good practice in interpreting" in further sessions.

#### 4. Conclusion

The mock (or mini) conferences model adopted at Heriot-Watt as part of the final stage of the conference interpreting training of M.A. and MSc students is designed around a fully multilingual format. Students are therefore placed in a context where they experience interpreting not only as providers, but also as pure users, either actively as they take relay, or as users of interpreting attending a debate.

The data collected in this study has highlighted the beneficial nature of MCs as a pedagogical tool, showing that, through this experience, students have further engaged with core skills embedded in conference interpreting. This situated learning activity allows participants to realize how valuable it is for them to practice in a setting as authentic as possible. It also helps them understand the benefits of peer feedback and the importance of good booth management, and it led them to reflect on the quality of their delivery, to name a few of the learning benefits.

The performance of students in MCs would be worth studying, then comparing results with performances in class to establish.

Directionality is an issue raised by participants; therefore it would also be interesting to further consider the impact that working from a relay into a B language has on the learning experience of other trainees, considering that the relay is provided by a trainee conference interpreter. To do so, a comparative experiment could be designed to study comments made by trainee interpreters taking relay from peers who interpret into their A language.

Ultimately, taking part in this experience has contributed to trainee interpreters collaboratively developing a model of good professional practice to aim for, and it has led them to realise through this authentic and immersive situated learning experience that engaging in group practice and peer-feedback has an impact on their own performance.

It is also apparent that having the opportunity to engage in this type of experiment, mirroring a professional setup is highly motivating for students and helps them focus their efforts with a better understanding of the challenges pertaining to an authentic practice of the skills required for the task. In this sense, the ethos of this situated learning experiment can be adopted in other fields in which students need to develop skills and work towards joining a community of

practice (Lave/Wenger 1991) such as translation but also marketing, engineering, law, etc. This training pattern can be mirrored by creating learning environments that immerse trainees in a genuine, controlled situation.

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