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What interpreting teachers can learn from students: A case study

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Summary. This case study serves as a preliminary inquiry into the constructive use of student feedback in interpreter education. An examination of student research proposals and reports in a professional interpreter training program reveals some recurring themes in students' interests, expectations and concerns regarding their learning experience, including interpreting strategies, directionality, language competency, and authenticity. These findings are a valuable resource to help interpreting teachers reflect on their practice and modify it for continuous improvement. At its conclusion, this article suggests some possible solutions for addressing the issues raised in the findings.

Keywords: reflective teaching, student feedback, interpreting strategies, directionality, language competency, authenticity

1. Introduction

Professional interpreter training has been one of the main topics in the field of interpreting studies. In fact, it can be said that an initial impetus for interpreting research derived from educators' need for a systematic understanding of interpreting phenomena and effective teaching methods (e.g. Gile, 2000; Pöchhacker, 2004; Sawyer, 2004). Against the backdrop of an increasing number of interpreter training programs in higher education, especially in China (Binhua and Lei, 2009), and the professionalisation of community interpreters (e.g. Wadensjö, et al., 2007), there is a growing body of work in recent years centering on interpreter training issues such as curriculum, aptitude, assessment and teaching methods. This trend is also evidenced by new academic journals (*The interpreter and translator trainer* and *The international journal of interpreter education*) and a number of conferences and seminars dedicated to interpreter (and translator) education. Once considered abundant in experience-based descriptions and deficient in systematic approach (Pöchhacker, 2004, p.177), research into interpreter education is now increasingly interdisciplinary and grounded in theory-backed, rigorous investigation. One of the scholars who has been leading these efforts is Moser-Mercer (e.g. 2000, 2007, 2008), who primarily draws on cognitive psychology and socio-constructive approaches. Of recent note is the emerging research, chiefly in Asian language contexts, that applies theories and methods developed in the field of language teaching (e.g. Lee, 2008; Chen, 2009).

Whether the topic is assessment, aptitude or teaching methods, much of the research on interpreter education involves students as providers of natural data or subjects of experiments. There seem, however, to be few studies that focus on student perspectives on their own training.[1] Student input is a valuable resource to help teachers reflect on their practice and modify it, if necessary, for continuous improvement. In discussing the importance of seeing through students' eyes as a way of becoming a critically reflective teacher, Brookfield notes the following:

> Without an appreciation of how students are experiencing learning, any methodological choices we make risk being ill-informed, inappropriate, or harmful. This is why, in my opinion,

> the most fundamental metacriterion for judging whether or not good teaching is happening is the extent to which teachers deliberately and systematically try to get inside students' heads and see classroom and learning from their point of view (Brookfield, 1995, p.35).

This educational philosophy can certainly be extended to interpreter training as well. In order to improve their teaching practices, interpreting teachers should be encouraged to pay close attention to students' needs, expectations, wishes, concerns and opinions regarding their learning experience.

This article explores how interpreting teachers may be able to utilize student feedback in the quest for effective teaching. It takes the form of a case study, focusing on the second-year interpreting students who took an interpreting theory and research course from 2007 to 2009 at the Monterey Institute of International Studies (MIIS) in the United States, and primarily draws on student research proposals and action research reports in order to seek student perspectives on interpreter education. After a brief introduction of the interpreter education program and its theory and research components at MIIS, an attempt is made to identify what the students may see as gaps in the teaching at MIIS by analysing recurring themes and concerns revealed in their papers. Although this is a preliminary inquiry into the constructive use of student feedback in interpreter education, it also suggests some possible solutions for the issues raised in the findings.

2. Interpreter education at MIIS

The translation and interpreting program at MIIS was established in 1968. Currently, it offers Master's level professional training for translators, interpreters and localisers in the language combinations of English and seven other languages: Chinese, French, German, Japanese, Korean, Russian and Spanish. Every year, about 100 new students enroll in the program, with Chinese and Spanish being the largest language groups in recent years. There are four degree tracks: Conference Interpretation (CI), Translation and Interpretation (TI), Translation (T) and Translation and Localisation Management (TLM). Most students, excluding those in TLM, receive the same basic training in translation and interpreting in the first year (two semesters). In the second-year (two semesters), they pursue specialised training in each degree track. The whole curriculum is designed to prepare students to become market-ready professionals upon graduation.

Although court interpreting courses are offered for Spanish students, the primary focus of interpreter training at MIIS is conference interpreting, and CI students regularly practice in multilingual conference settings. The interpreting exams at the end of the program are frequently attended by recruiters from government agencies and international organizations. Most graduates from the interpreting tracks work as freelance or staff interpreters all over the world in the public and private sectors, including the U.S. State Department, the United Nations and large multinational corporations.

3. Theory and research courses at MIIS

All the courses in the first year, except public speaking and TLM courses, are taught in language-specific classes at MIIS. It is in the third semester that general courses on theory and research are offered: Overview of Translation and Interpreting Studies (Overview, hereafter) for all the second-year

students in the first half of the semester, Contemporary Research on Translation (Research on Translation, hereafter) for all T and TLM students, and Contemporary Research on Interpreting (Research on Interpreting, hereafter) for all CI students in the second half of the semester. TI students can choose either Research on Translation or Research on Interpreting. This article focuses on the students who took Research on Interpreting from 2007 to 2009: a total of 130 second-year CI and TI majors who had received more than two semesters of training in translation, sight translation, and consecutive and simultaneous interpreting. They had also been exposed to some translation theories taught in Overview.

The author has taught Research on Interpreting since 2007. Two main goals of this eight-week course are presented to the students as follows: to become familiar with the key milestones, concepts and recent trends in Interpreting Studies; and to be initiated into basic research methods and approaches to prepare for research projects in the future.[2] It is explained to the students that, as interpreters formally trained in a well-established graduate program like MIIS, they will be expected to be able to describe and explain various aspects of what they do as interpreters, and that this course equips them with useful frameworks and research findings for that task. It is also explained that the knowledge of theoretical concepts and models helps students engage in meta-cognitive learning, which promotes reflective, deliberate practice (e.g. Moser-Mercer, 2008).

The first four weeks of Research on Interpreting are dedicated to reviewing and discussing the main concepts and issues in Interpreting Studies. A quick class survey each year indicates that there is variation among different teachers as to how much theory is introduced in language-specific classes during the first year of the program. Therefore, efforts are made not only to ensure that all the students, including those who have not been exposed to theory, gain a good grasp of the topics covered, but also to facilitate discussions that draw on their own experience so that everyone in class will be an engaged participant. Although some minor changes are made each year, the course addresses topics the teacher identifies as essential in the academic field of Interpreting Studies and relevant to the students. They include the history of conference interpreting, the history of conference interpreter education, the evolution of Interpreting Studies, Interpretive Theory (e.g. Seleskovitch and Lederer, 1989/1995), Effort Models (e.g. Gile 1995/2009), norms in interpreting, ethics, the role of interpreters, and socio-political aspects of interpreting. Students are required to read designated articles and actively engage in discussions in response to the questions raised by the teacher and the discussants assigned to each topic.

The remaining four weeks of the course are allocated to student presentations. At the end of the course CI students are required to submit a research proposal, an action research report (such as on consecutive interpreting practice based on the study of previous literature on note-taking), a research report (such as a comparative study of admissions exams in TI programs in Korea and at MIIS), or a critical review of previous literature. In addition to individual consultations with the teacher, students utilise feedback from their colleagues during their in-class presentations to finalise their submissions.

4. Student expectations and concerns

From 2007 to 2009, a total of seventy papers were submitted in Research on Interpreting: fifty-two research proposals, eight research reports, six action research reports and four critical reviews of previous literature. This article

examines some of these student papers as a source for identifying their interests and expectations for and concerns about their learning experience as interpreting students at MIIS. Unlike traditional means such as course evaluations, questionnaires or interviews, these papers are not designed to gather information about how students view the teaching they receive. The author, however, discovered over the three years that this student work is quite revealing of the state of teaching at MIIS, challenging long-established assumptions and offering useful hints for more effective teaching. Students are eager to improve their interpreting skills and prepare themselves for the market as much as possible, and they have a strong desire to understand how to achieve that. Some papers, however, indicate that such needs and expectations are not always fully addressed in class. It is not unusual for student authors to cite the lack or inadequacy of certain elements in the instruction they have received as the motivation for embarking on action research or devising research proposals. Indeed, some of the papers offer suggestions, explicitly or implicitly, for better teaching and curriculum design. In the search for student views of interpreter education at MIIS, the following report provides an overview of the student papers and a summary of recurring themes found in them. The language classifications (A, B and C) are referred to as they are used at MIIS, which is in line with the classifications set by AIIC (International Association of Conference Interpreters): an A language as the interpreter's native language, a B language as a non-A language of which the interpreter has a perfect command, and a C language as a non-A-or-B language of which the interpreter has a perfect understanding (AIIC 2010).

4.1 Overview of the student papers

Of the seventy papers submitted, forty-eight deal with interpreting in general, eight with simultaneous interpreting (SI) in general, seven with consecutive interpreting in general, four with SI with text, two with "simultaneous consecutive" or "SimConsec" interpreting (Pöchhacker, 2006), and one with relay in SI. As for settings, most of the papers discuss interpreting in general, but three focus on diplomatic settings, two on courtroom settings, and one on telephone interpreting. All the papers on specific interpreting settings are based on the student authors' personal experiences. Applying the general topic categories used in Pöchhacker (2004) ('process', 'product and performance', 'practice and profession' and 'pedagogy'), 36% primarily address pedagogical issues (curriculum, selection, teaching, evaluation, etc.), 34% mainly deal with the process of interpreting (split attention, memory, strategies, note-taking, etc.), 24% focus on professional issues (history, ethics, technology, social status, etc.) and 6% on product and performance (quality, voice, etc.). Some papers actually cover more than one category, for example, comparing the quality of interpretation (product) and interpreting strategies (process) in A-language-to-B-language and B-to-A SI; and many papers centering on 'process', 'product' or 'profession' refer to the pedagogical implications of their findings. If those with references to training are included, 73% of the papers embrace pedagogical perspectives. It may be considered only natural that students in the midst of interpreter training are concerned with how and what they are taught. As to why those topics were chosen, some papers point to challenges and frustration the student authors experienced, and a few explicitly cite the absence of teachers' guidance, or confusion caused by inconsistent guidance among different teachers. Some gaps between what they experienced in internships and what is taught at MIIS are also mentioned. On the whole, students' interests, expectations, concerns and opinions regarding the methods, curriculum, evaluation and other aspects

of interpreter education at MIIS are revealed within these papers. The following is a summary of some common threads that emerge from them.

4.2 Explicit, focused instruction on strategies

Many students want to know specific solutions for specific problems they encounter in interpreting. About 41% of the papers directly deal with interpreting strategies and some of the student authors start their class presentation and/or paper by pointing out the lack of explicit or systematic instruction on how they can overcome the challenges they face in interpreting. For example, six papers on note-taking indicate that students appreciate the personal nature of note-taking techniques but would like to be informed of different approaches and relevant empirical findings (such as taking notes in the target language versus the A-language, and different methods suitable for different language combinations and directions) as they develop their own system, rather than pursuing an unguided 'trial-and-error' approach. Student 1 argues in his research proposal, "these [different] recommendations [by different teachers] baffle beginning students of interpretation, who can be made to feel like an obedient dog commanded by one person to sit and by another to lie down at the same time." And he identifies "a clear need for further, empirical research to address the pressing question of what language is most often used (and perhaps eventually, what language should be used) in consecutive note-taking by professional interpreters". Other strategies and techniques of particular interest to the students include SI with text, interpreting into the pivot language in relay settings, SI into a B-language, and how to deal with high-speed input, literary quotes, slang, and numbers in Asian languages. For example, Student 2 in her research proposal states, "we have been taught the three disciplines [translation, consecutive and simultaneous interpreting] in our classes, but no one has taught how to work with text in the booth. … The aim [of this research] is to prove how important it is to receive training in this type of simultaneous interpreting."

4.3 Directionality

Directionality is one of the discussion topics that most attract student attention. Students are aware of the classic debate of whether or not interpreters should engage in SI into their B-language, and of the sentiment among some teachers that interpreting into the B-language is not a desirable practice. However, they also understand that SI into B is part of the market reality for Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Russian and Spanish interpreters, and interpreting students in those languages do take SI into B courses at MIIS. Therefore, they show great interest not only in defending the virtues of interpreting into B, but also in learning specific strategies for SI into B. The eleven research proposals which directly focus on SI directionality indicate their belief or hypothesis that: 1) SI into B can produce better quality interpreting than SI into A depending on the type of speech; 2) SI into B requires different strategies from those for SI into A; and 3) therefore, teachers should provide explicit guidance for these different strategies. There seems to be a strong desire for instruction sensitive to the specific needs of students studying SI into B.

4.4 Bilingualism and language categories

As mentioned above, MIIS classifies languages in accordance with the AIIC guidelines. There are, however, varying degrees of bilingual (multilingual) competency among students. Besides students who have clear-cut A and B languages, there are students who claim to be 'double-A', meaning they have two native languages. They are typically what students call 'early bilinguals'

who grew up 'bilingual and bicultural' because of their educational and/or family backgrounds. Preliminary findings of the author's ongoing investigation on students' bilingualism and interviews of interpreting teachers[3] point to that those 'early bilinguals' who had exposure to two (or more) languages before adolescent or 'heritage language speakers' such as those grew up speaking Spanish at home in the United States do not automatically make the most successful students despite their native-like fluency in both languages.[4] Class discussions in Research on Interpreting indicate that students are also aware of some issues particular to 'early bilingual' students. There are five research proposals that reflect such language competency issues. For example, Student 3 and Student 4 in their papers show interest in the different strengths and weaknesses between what they call 'early bilinguals' and 'late bilinguals' (who acquired the second language after adolescence) as interpreting students, and suggest that different types of guidance and instruction should be offered to the two different groups. In response to a paper presentation on the unclear definition of 'double-A' by Student 5, some students in class questioned the relevance of AIIC-type language classifications, citing the arbitrary nature of the distinctions and the absence of such classifications in Asian-language interpreting markets. In Japan, for example, A, B and C refer to the skill levels of interpreters, not to language classifications. Further, Student 6 in her research proposal suggests different language combinations (specifically, two European languages, and an Asian language and a European language) have different degrees of innate difficulties in interpreting and different teaching methods and curricula should be applied.

4.5 Authenticity

Some research proposals are based on concerns about possible gaps between the artificial teaching environment and the actual professional environment. Student 7 in her research proposal describes the differences in the exam conditions at MIIS and the actual professional environment she experienced as a summer intern, such as the availability of the agenda and advanced materials, and the existence of a booth mate. Student 8 discusses the importance of having live speakers and a real audience for interpreting practice, which enables students to learn the communicative nature of interpreting through interacting with the speakers and the audience. Her hypothesis is that students perform better with a real audience than with colleagues and teachers listening to evaluate the performance, which is how most classes are currently conducted. In addition, three proposals address the perspectives of users of interpreting services. They are concerned about possible differences between the training norms (what is considered acceptable or appropriate in school) and users' expectancy norms (what is considered acceptable or appropriate by users of interpreting services) (Chesterman, 1993). Students 9 and 10 in their joint research proposal argue that in school students "lose sight that interpretation is, at its core, a service provided in the market, same as other services" and ask if "users of interpreters have any other expectations that are quite different [from what is taught in class]". In another proposal, Student 11 lays out an experiment to seek users' preference between the SimConsec mode and the traditional consecutive mode, and suggests SimConsec be taught at MIIS if the results shows the users' preference of that mode.

5. Discussion

Perspectives of interpreting students examined above provide an opportunity for teachers to reflect on their practice and explore ways to become more effective in guiding students to achieve their educational goals at MIIS. Key ideas on which teachers can draw for their critical reflection include: 1) Students seem to be very interested in the process of interpreting, especially strategies to deal with specific challenges in interpreting; 2) Students seem to be sensitive to directionality and language competency issues, and feel that a long-established universal curriculum may not serve well to address specific needs in specific language combinations; and 3) Students seem to be very interested in whether what they are taught is in line with the market reality.

The first point suggests that teachers should attempt to provide more process-oriented instruction rather than solely focusing on error corrections in the product (renditions by student interpreters). To that end, teachers must first understand the nature of the challenges student interpreters are facing. Some teachers may rely on their professional intuitions and experiences to identify the problems, and share their 'professional tips' to address them. At the same time, it is also possible to employ a more systematic approach by drawing on theoretical frameworks. For example, Gile's Effort Models (e.g. 2009, pp.157-190), which views the process of interpreting in terms of allocation of processing capacity among different 'efforts', can serve as a useful tool to explain certain problems students experience while interpreting and suggest possible coping strategies. Gile presents other concepts and models as well to explain principles, methods and procedures of interpreting (and translation) in his seminal book, *Basic concepts and models in translator and interpreter training* (1995/2009). These theoretical frameworks can also be used for student interpreters to reflect on their own performance and become adaptive and autonomous learners. As technology and other factors evolve in the profession of interpreting, students are expected to face new challenges when they move onto the professional world. The ability to analyze new problems and devise possible solutions on their own will be a great asset when they become professional interpreters (see e.g. Lee, 2005; Moser-Mercer, 2008). Therefore, in addition to teaching strategies and tactics for specific problems students face, teachers should be encouraged to equip students with relevant theoretical tools for adaptive and autonomous learning.

In addressing student concerns about directionality, language competency, and authenticity, teachers may want to think 'out of the box' and look into ways of teaching that are different from certain long-standing assumptions, such as that interpreting should be taught by a native speaker of the target language[5]. Strategies for SI into B may be understood and taught better by those teachers who interpret into B. Team-teaching with a native speaker of the target language who can probably provide better feedback on the product may be an ideal arrangement. Also, for guidance for 'early bilingual' students, interpreting teachers may find useful information in the studies of different types of bilinguals and their cognitive abilities (e.g. Butler and Hakuta, 2004; Christoffels and de Groot, 2005; Kroll and Tokowicz, 2005). Although there were some discussions on bilingualism in the context of interpreter aptitudes and psycholinguistic analysis of interpreting in early times (e.g. Lambert, 1978; Thiery, 1978; Harris and Sherwood, 1978; see Valdés and Angelelli, 2003), interpreting teachers have generally emphasized that interpreter training is not about language teaching (e.g. Seleskovitch, 1999; Mackintosh, 1999; Gile, 2005; Donovan, 2006) and perhaps have not paid much attention to research findings in the studies of bilingualism or second language acquisition (SLA). It should be reminded that collaboration with SLA experts who are interested in interpreter training (e.g. Zannirato,

2008) could lead to a deeper understanding of issues specific to 'early bilingual' or 'heritage language' students, and to the discovery of effective teaching methods for those students who need special language enhancement.

Authenticity in some aspects of interpreter education, such as speech materials used in class and exam conditions, has been discussed as one of the components of recommended practices in interpreter training (e.g. Moser-Mercer, 1994: Kurz, 2002; Sawyer, 2004). As part of the efforts to provide students a learning environment that is close to the professional conditions, MIIS has been offering the Interpretation Practicum course through which students regularly interpret real-life lectures and conferences. This course, however, is mainly for simultaneous interpreting and does not provide many opportunities for students to consecutively interpret live events. As a way to achieve a higher level of authenticity in interpreter training, teaching consecutive interpreting in both directions in one class as opposed to two separate classes in each direction, for example, may bring the classroom closer to the market practice in dialogue-type settings. Using live speakers in those classes would be even better for students to learn how to work with speakers. In terms of authenticity in exam settings, coordination with various testing organizations and employers should be encouraged. Bringing authenticity to exams at MIIS would not be as effective if those organizations continue to give exams in ways that do not reflect the standard interpreting practices in the real world.

6. Conclusion

This case study, set in a professional training program for conference interpreters, was a preliminary inquiry into the effective use of student feedback in interpreter education. It was based on the belief that student feedback is a valuable resource for continuous improvement in teaching. An examination of student research proposals and reports has pointed to some aspects of interpreter education in which students are particularly interested, such as strategies, directionality, language competency, and authenticity. Interpreting teachers should be encouraged to pay close attention to those issues in critical reflection on their practice.

As a next step, the author has been conducting class surveys and interviews with students to cross-examine the findings of this article and also to seek student perspectives on when and how to introduce theory components in interpreter education. In addition, the present investigation can be extended to seek teachers' reactions to student feedback. Teachers should articulate and rationalise to students the purpose of what they are doing in interpreting classes. If they find hints in student feedback for exploring new ways of teaching or modifying their current ways of teaching, they should not shy away from those opportunities. Both teachers and students are "in it" to co-create successful learning environments in interpreter education. Communication between them and open-mindedness to new ideas and suggestions is essential to this endeavour.

Notes

1. One exception is Lee (2005), which pays due attention to student feedback in examining the effectiveness of student self-evaluations in an interpreting class.
2. Like most professional graduate programs in the United States, a thesis is not a requirement for obtaining a Master's degree at MIIS.
3. The author has been investigating the relations between the history of students' second language acquisition and their performance in interpreting classes and exams

at MIIS. She has also been interviewing interpreting teachers at MIIS as to their teaching methods, challenges they face in class, etc.

4. See Butler and Hakuta (2004), etc. for different types of bilinguals, and Valdés (2001), Van Deusen-Scholl (2003), etc. for the definition of heritage language speakers.
5. It has been a long-standing policy at MIIS that a course be taught by a native speaker of the target language. When such teachers are not available, a native speaker of the source language teaches the course, which occasionally happens with Asian languages.

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