Issues in Interpreting Pedagogy

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Abstract
This paper attempts to uncover some of the issues that are relevant to the training of interpreters: (a) optimal training at the undergraduate or postgraduate level; (b) training consisting of teaching language, as opposed to teaching translation only; (c) theoretical input as a means to assist and improve translation and interpreting; (d) text typologies as a pedagogical tool; and (e) evaluation and errors. These issues are also discussed in the Malaysian context. By uncovering the issues pertaining to the training of interpreters, steps can be taken to allow further improvements to be made, not only for training purposes, but also to elevate the status of the profession.

Keywords: interpreting pedagogy; translation teaching; language training; text types; skills; assessment

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1. Introduction

The training of interpreters has been intensely debated; issues include areas as basic as the general requirements for students entering the field to the complexity of the teaching method itself. This paper attempts to uncover some of the issues that are relevant, with special reference to the Malaysian context. The areas discussed in this paper include:

- optimal training at the undergraduate or postgraduate level,
- language teaching vs. translation teaching,
- directionality of interpreting,
- theoretical input as a means to assist and improve translation and interpreting,
- text typologies as a pedagogical tool, and
- evaluation and errors (assessment).

It is believed that many of the aspects of translation teaching are applicable to interpreting training, or at least form the basis for it, that is, understanding the features of texts, translation theories, and methods. Hence, there are facts that touch on translation that have been gathered for this paper that are very relevant to interpreting and its training. However, as many scholars in the interpreting field have argued, there are many other skills required for interpreting that are not part of the skills needed for translation, such as speaking, listening, and note-taking, which makes interpreting unique from translation.

In the Malaysian context, the country’s involvement in the translation and, in particular, the interpreting field has been a rather subdued process. Only in recent years has translation taken center stage, when the government’s aim was to acquire as much knowledge as possible from various parts of the world. Translational activities, including interpreting, have been given special status where, currently, they are tax exempt. Despite this fact, interpreting is still an unknown territory to many. It is a highly specialized area in which very few are willing to venture. By uncovering the issues pertaining to the training of interpreters, steps can be taken to enable further improvements—for training purposes, as well as to elevate the status of the profession.

2. Is the optimal training at the undergraduate or the postgraduate level?

One prominent issue concerning the training of interpreters that is often debated is whether it should be taught only at the postgraduate level. Although interpreter training is offered at the undergraduate level at a number of academic institutions worldwide, it is generally the norm for institutions to offer interpreter training at the postgraduate level. This is likely due to the nature of the training, which requires a certain level of maturity, knowledge, and experience in a variety of fields. Individuals must also be mentally and physically ready to undergo the tasks presented to them in the training, which, more often than not, are exhausting and stressful.

The Monterey Institute of International Studies lays out quite stringent but useful guidelines for interested students, in order to prepare them to become students of interpreting. The guidelines given are:
1. Read extensively, especially in your non-native language(s).
2. Watch the TV news and listen to radio news in all working languages.
3. Strengthen your general knowledge of economics, history, the law, international politics, and scientific concepts and principles (in that order).
4. Live in a country that speaks your non-native language. A stay of at least six months to a year is recommended.
5. Fine-tune your writing and research skills.
6. Improve your public speaking skills.
7. Hone your analytical skills.
8. Become computer savvy.
9. Learn how to take care of yourself—eat sensibly, exercise regularly, and get sufficient sleep.
10. Be prepared for the long haul.

The guidelines are meant to prepare individuals interested in this field, prior to the training process at the institution. It is apparent from the list that they need to be very well-disciplined, hardworking, experienced, fit, and, most important, already competent in their working languages. This brings us to the issue of whether translation and interpreter training should include language training. One can surmise from the list that Item 1 should be practiced as regularly as possible and that the materials should be from various fields and at different levels of difficulty. Thus, one does not only learn the language but also the way texts are structured, opinions are presented, and styles vary with different people when conveying their individual messages and intentions. Item 2 requires, not only listening skills, but also various other skills, such as the understanding of dialects and views of particular individuals, societies, or countries, in general—apart from the obvious need to keep abreast of current issues. Item 3 is needed to complement the knowledge of current issues, as well as the historical elements, because all of these fields are important aspects that are discussed worldwide. Item 4 obviously assists the interpreter in experiencing and understanding different cultures and the lives of different people. Items 5 through 8 sharpen the skills needed to become a better interpreter. Item 9, although seemingly trivial, is actually among the basic necessities for good interpreting; these are habits required of a good interpreter. Finally, the last item warns apprentice interpreters about their future in the field.

The work of interpreters should never be taken lightly; misinterpretation could lead to embarrassing or disastrous consequences, affecting the reputations or even the lives of innocent victims. Thus, absolute maturity and commitment are critical, which is why many argue that the coursework should be offered at the postgraduate level. In 1959, a school policy was discussed at several Association Internationale des Interprètes de Conférence (International Association of Conference Interpreters; AIIC) general assemblies, and a standard criteria was adopted. The first criterion is that the training should start at the postgraduate level; applicants should have three or four years of university training before entering a course for interpreters (Seleskovitch, 1999). An example of an established and well-known interpreter training institution in the United Kingdom is the former Polytechnic of Central London (now known as Westminster University). It offered a six-month course with rigorous training that was as close to the real scenario as possible. The reason for a short-term course was that it should be kept separate from the teaching of languages or from the training of translators. The candidates selected were very small in number, never exceeding 30 in any given year. They were also graduates specializing in a variety of areas or mature students who had acquired real-world knowledge and an understanding of the languages required, although they may or may not have had a language degree. The school also did not believe that students with previous undergraduate level training in translation or interpreting were especially well qualified as bad habits that were acquired made teaching and learning more difficult (Longley, 1978). Only candidates who were very experienced and fluent in the languages required would be accepted. The University of Westminster had a change in the program structure whereby it currently offers a master’s level course for the duration of one year. The entry requirement for one of the programs, a Master of Arts in Conference Interpreting, is still quite stringent and requires candidates to have a university degree, a thorough understanding of two or three passive (C) languages and an excellent command of the mother tongue (i.e., their A language). Applicants with a second active (B) language, with or without a C language, are also considered for admission into the program. They are also
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expected to have a broad general education, strong analytical skills, an interest in current affairs, as well as flexibility, stamina, and the ability to work under pressure.

Keiser (1978) asserts that a certain maturity and level of previous training are desirable, if not necessary, in learning interpreting. The candidate is required to, first and foremost, understand the message in order to interpret it. In order to understand, the interpreter must be able to place himself/herself at the intellectual level of the speaker. More often than not, these speakers will be scientists and/or university-trained people. Thus, the translator and interpreter must have the same frame of mind and master the same intellectual discipline. Secondly, once the original message has been understood, it should never be rendered in another language by mere word-by-word translation, but in its whole essence—the content, the sense, and the emotion. Knowing how extremely demanding the (pre)requisites for learning interpreting are, individuals training to become interpreters should understand the amount of responsibility that must be shouldered.

With regard to this matter, Keiser (1978) also points out that “it is all a matter of how much one wants to invest in such training, of how long one can keep a student on a school bench, of how big a percentage of failures one is willing to accept” (p.14). This fact should be taken into consideration as not all translators, or even true bilinguals, can become interpreters. Another point that should be considered is stated by Seleskovitch (1999):

Given the rather low social standing of interpretation, it is hardly to be expected that highly gifted, bilingual if not trilingual young people endowed with vast culture would chose interpreting as a vocation when more prestigious professions are within their reach. It is therefore more realistic to determine the length of training in accordance with the average level of graduate students and, based on experience, to recognize that several years of training may be necessary in view of the degree of proficiency to be achieved and of the fierce competition on the market. (p. 61)

Within the Malaysian context, students with high proficiency in languages are typically also high achievers in other subjects. To attract them to a field such as translation and/or interpreting against the more attractive fields of medicine, engineering, information technology, and architecture, among others, has not been an easy task. Interesting information based on verbal reports received from alumni of the Universiti Sains Malaysia Translation and Interpreting bachelor of arts program is that high performers graduating from the program have been offered positions other than those of translators and/or interpreters. They managed to secure jobs very quickly because of the skills that they had developed in the program. These graduates would decide to do translation and/or interpreting tasks only on a part-time basis or as part of their future plan, once they are ready to be full-time translators and/or interpreters. In an interesting twist, the ideal criteria for candidates for interpreter training are found in people who are already bilingually/multilingually fluent, as well as biculturally/multicultural competent, with excellent skills and abilities in areas such as speaking, listening, researching, and critical analysis. Yet it is hard to attract these people, as they have other, perhaps more attractive, career options. Thus, to allow for more numbers, the entry level requirement is often lowered so that more candidates are eligible. However, once these candidates have been accepted into the program and have gone through the training, possibly excelling in the field, they might not end up as translators and/or interpreters because they have very marketable skills in other fields due, in part, to the skills that they have acquired during the translation and interpreting training.

Nevertheless, program designers should not lose sight of the importance of creating an interpreting program with high standards. The length of training required depends on the students’ level of competence at the start, the type and nature of the coursework taught, and the expected results. This is also related to what Pöchhacker (2004) notes as the “relative weight of professional vs. academic course content” (p. 179) that would be the basis for the decision on which level and format should be taken for any interpreter training programs. In the Malaysian context, it may seem disheartening to see a large number of students who have excelled in the interpreter training program and who have not ended up as interpreters. However, it may be a huge consolation to know that the skills the students have acquired have molded them to become people with specialized skills relevant to other fields as well.
3. Language teaching vs. translation teaching

As part of the admission process for translator and/or interpreter training, many institutions require a high level of language competency, underlining the notion that the training is mainly focused on sharpening the translation or interpreting skills themselves rather than language skills. But for practical, social, and political reasons, admissions of many institutions may choose to disregard such a ruling. One such example is illustrated by Pym (1992a), cited in Hatim (2001), who argues that:

The power structures...are such that translation is and will continue to be used as a way of learning foreign languages, [and, to insist on] a perfect command of foreign languages before learning about translation...would mean teaching translation to virtually empty classes. (p. 168)

This notion is also supported by Li (2007) in a study that found that one of the three most important considerations in recruiting new translators is their language competence, apart from translation skills and experience. Thus, there is a demand or a need for language training to be an integral part of the training program. Although many would argue that translation programs are not language programs, it should not be totally excluded from the curriculum.

This situation has been particularly true at the Universiti Sains Malaysia, particularly during the early years after the introduction of the bachelor of arts in translation and interpreting. As translation and, particularly interpreting, were unknown to many, the program did not attract students who were really interested in the field or had achieved the necessary standards required to undertake the program. With some lowering of the entrance level requirements, one of the consequences was a rather heavy inclusion of language training in the program. Recently, however, the trend seems to have changed; the field is now widely recognized, and the program has attracted more highly qualified candidates from within Malaysia. This could also be due to positive comments received from graduates of the program, which at the same time have increasingly improved the status of the field and the program in Malaysia.

This supports Pym’s (1993) remark, cited in Li (2007), that the best that can be done is to encourage flexibility and be on the alert for changes in terms of translation training. The market demand for translation and interpreting in Malaysia has been increasing, which has resulted in the profession being more visible to, and well regarded by, the general public; consequently, the attraction to the field has increased. Simultaneously, this has encouraged candidates who are better qualified to venture into the profession. At the same time, the type of training provided would also experience changes according to the market demand, as well as current developments within the field. In terms of language training, it should not be merely grammar-based, but there must be the inclusion of more complex aspects of language learning, such as coherence and cohesion, text types, and communicative values.

4. Theoretical input as a means to assist and improve translation and interpreting

The question as to whether theoretical input is desirable for the training of translators and interpreters leads to the question of whether translators and interpreters are born or made. It is the earlier resistance to theory that was partly a legacy of the interpreters-are-born-not-made school of thought. However, as Herbert (1978), quoted in Mackintosh (1999) says: “Fortunately a number of excellent schools, particularly in universities, can now supply them, and it can no longer be said, as was formerly admitted (sic), that an interpreter is born, not made” (p. 67).

The benefit of learning theoretical concepts may not always be evident to students directly, as Mackintosh (1999) (who cites Gile, 1995) indicates:

The fact that many courses thus equip them with theoretical tools enabling them to identify the probable causes of difficulties, and successes, when engaged in the interpreting process enables students to focus their attention in a more productive manner and, in the longer term, this is likely to result in higher levels of performance overall as awareness of the factors involved grows. (p. 74)
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Li (2000), cited in Li (2007) states that many administrators of translation services, as well as professional translators, do not deny the usefulness of teaching theories, as it would eventually assist translators in producing quality translations and communicating effectively. However, it is also suggested that better methods need to be devised for effective learning and application. This brings us to those people who are training. Longley (1978) comments that “there are some things that only a professional can teach, but at the end of the day’s work in the booth, one is too tired to think a great deal about pedagogical methods” (p. 53).

Furthermore, the number of truly professional translators and interpreters is small; among them, only a few know how to impart their knowledge. Hence, professional translators, although they are the best candidates to teach interpreting skills, cannot guarantee success for the students. As Longley (1978) also claims:

Although there are some things that are best taught by experienced professional interpreters, unless that interpreter also knows how to impart his knowledge, and develop skill and ability in others, his students will become but pale reflections of their teacher. (p.53)

Even among qualified teachers themselves, not all of them are confident that they can teach effectively, which explains why training and seminars are constantly being offered to teachers to ensure better results. What is best, perhaps, is that the professional interpreters and the teachers of interpreting work hand-in-hand and for both to be constantly involved in on-going discussions of matters pertaining to the translation and interpreting field, as well as the didactic implications. These discussions are now more easily accessible as they no longer take place only in formal settings like seminars or conferences. More relaxed and casual discussions are also conducted through translation and interpreting Web sites, where individuals can chat about or discuss with the rest of the members any relevant topics or issues that have been raised. Hale (2007) raises a significant point when she states:

Whereas it is crucial for the validity of courses to have the input of practitioners, it is crucial to ensure that those practitioners who are trainers have the appropriate academic and research background to inform their teaching....there needs to be cross fertilization between research, training and practice: where the research informs the training and the practice, the training improves the practice and generates research questions, and the practice improves the training and generates research questions. (p.184)

Increasingly more people involved in the field of translation studies, particularly the ones directly associated with the training of translators and interpreters, are leaning toward the belief that inclusion of theoretical input is critical to producing better translators and interpreters. Factors such as understanding text in context are becoming increasingly popular, as the approach is holistic and encompasses important and practical features, such as register variables, pragmatics, semiotics, structure and texture, etc. Kussmaul (1995) also asserts that one of the characteristics of a good translator and interpreter is self-awareness, which breeds self-confidence. Self-awareness includes the ability to recognize problems. If this ability is lacking, apparently smooth translation processes may result in blunders. An interpreter, without a proper training, might not realize that underlying features exist in a text, other than the fact that the lexical and semantic knowledge is not substantial enough. This is where skills such as text analysis can come into play.

Another argument that should be taken into consideration is the fact that possibly one of the most important factors in interpreting is speed. It is also worthwhile to invest time in teaching students the analytical procedures of the interpreter training. The outcome is highly likely to produce interpreters who possess the professional expertise and behaviours necessary for taking on new responsibilities and fulfilling tasks, which adds prestige to the profession. The strategies learned during the training stage may become internalized and automatic through frequent use. Their application will take increasingly less time; thus, the critical aspect of speed is achieved. Nord (1997), cited in Bastin (2000), asserts that anything that obstructs the achievement of a particular function for the recipient constitutes a translation error. According to Nord (1994), also cited in Bastin, if the original linguistic and cultural setting is correctly analyzed and a translation brief which defines the intended function of the target text is given to students, fewer linguistic and translation errors are likely to be made. As a result of minimizing obstructions to the understanding of a text or an utterance, the speed in interpreting could also be improved. Theoretical input provides the critical information necessary in minimizing obstructions to text comprehension; combined with practice, the desired output, in terms of interpreting performance, might be further improved.
5. Text typologies as a pedagogical tool

A course must be carefully planned in order to ensure success. One of the most important aspects in course development is the choice of text material. It is on this point that a course stands or falls. Among other things, written materials should be original, not translations, unless they are being used for comparative study. For recordings used for interpreting practice, live recordings of native speakers, as well as non-native speakers, are preferable. The use of recordings of non-native speakers is advised, as speakers at international gatherings are often called upon to express themselves in a language that is not their own, typically English. Hence, it is important for the interpreters to attune their ears to various accents. Furthermore, a speech delivered in broken English simply cannot be transposed literally. Clumsy as it may sound in the English source text, the target text interpretation must make sense to those in the room when it is delivered. The meaning has to be reconstructed on the basis of the knowledge of the subject, the culture of the speaker’s country, and the clues that can be gathered in understanding the texts (i.e., the use of metaphors, marked use of lexical items, intertextuality, etc.). Attempts should also be made to give the students opportunities to practice through role playing, such as in simulated interviews and discussions in which actual people are involved and the students are required to be the interpreters. The people involved in the simulated settings could be the staff, invited guests, or even the students themselves. In this way, the students are exposed to an environment in which various features of communicative events can occur spontaneously, as would be encountered in normal and unpracticed dialogues. Whenever possible, excursions to various settings to practice their interpreting skills and be given input on their performances would not only provide further practice, but a different environment could be a welcome change from the monotony of practicing in lab booths.

In interpreting, one cannot rely on words alone. A great deal more is involved, including the knowledge of the speaker’s and listener’s cultural backgrounds, intentions, and motivations, and the knowledge of the subject matter of the gatherings, discussions, or events taking place. The practice materials must be from a variety of fields—it may be of a political, cultural, legal, medical, or sporting nature—unless of course, the practice is for a specific type of interpreting, such as health care or legal interpreting. Nonetheless, even within those specific types of interpreting, variety can be achieved as different scenarios can be created to enhance the learning process. Bastin (2000) suggests that teachers may demonstrate their creativity in various ways by selecting texts that meet their pedagogical objectives and the interests of their trainees, suggesting exercises based on their own process for finding solutions, designing assignments that involve creative solutions to major difficulties, and finally, stimulating the trainees’ creativity and stressing it in their evaluation.

6. Evaluation and errors

There is no simple and convenient way of grading. Evaluation measures the extent to which teaching objectives are achieved; it does not only reveal the success or failure of each student, but also the teacher’s teaching performance and his/her ability to establish a viable relationship between the teaching objectives and activities and their students’ performance (Bastin, 2000). Trainees must be taught how to do things right rather than being punished for what they have done wrong. Error analysis teaches the trainees what not to do; how to do things right and how to replicate good methodology is the teacher’s duty. As Hatim and Mason (1997) explain, “[t]here is everything to be gained from increasing trainees’ awareness of curriculum objectives and stages in skill development” (p. 200).

It is very difficult to assess translation objectively, as House (1976) points out, quoted in Mason (1987), “...translation is a complex, hermeneutic process….It seems to be unlikely that translation quality assessment can ever be completely objectified in the manner of the results of natural science subjects” (p. 82). Nevertheless, there should be guidelines for how the process is to be assessed. The following are broad categories of assessment guidelines, as proposed by Mason, in which analysis of texts and assessment of adequacy of any target text in relation to its source text. It is a checklist of variables, rather than a full-fledged model, and it is presented to students so that they can perform comparative evaluations of translation/interpreting. It is also used to assess
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students’ work, which then leads to discussions of translating/interpreting problems that are exemplified in particular text samples. The categories proposed are:

| CONTEXT       | Communicative (i.e., topic, field, mode, tenor) |
|               | Pragmatic (i.e., speech act, text act)          |
|               | Semiotic (i.e., text norms, text type)          |
| STRUCTURE     | Cohesion/coherence                              |
|               | Informativity (i.e., redundancy, ellipsis)      |
| TEXTURE       | Syntactic organization                          |
|               | Sentence perspective                             |
|               | Lexical selection                               |

Which aspect of the above categories needs to be emphasised depends on the type of interpreting. For example, Hatim and Mason (1997) describe the prominence of context over structure and texture in liaison interpreting; therefore, every segment of the text has to be processed, treating it as a completed statement, making sure it is consistent with the segment that precedes it:

...on the basis of separate instalments of input, linked with each other only at the highest level of text organisation (i.e. that of the entire interaction) each chunk of output is expected to be coherent in its own right contextually. (pp. 50–51)

The three categories listed above provide quite an extensive view of the items to be aware of in understanding a text and which should help in being able to convey the messages in interpreting. A thorough grasp of the different categories in interpreting would also enable self-directed learning among students, in addition to providing the trainers with a guideline on how to analyze students’ interpreting attempts.

7. Conclusion

This paper provides the many issues that are relevant to the training of interpreters, with special reference to the Malaysian context. Issues given focus include: (a) optimal training at undergraduate or postgraduate level; (b) training consisting of teaching language, as compared with teaching only translation; (c) looking at theoretical input as a means to assist and improve translation and interpreting; (d) text typologies as a pedagogical tool; and, (e) evaluation and the assessment of errors. Interpreters and translators share many common traits and Kussmaul (1995) touches on the significance in improving the status of the profession through professional training so that “[t]here is a good chance that once translators behave as experts when talking to other experts they will be regarded as experts in their own right” (p. 147). To be called an expert, one must have the skills required in the field. Through the understanding of the issues that prevail within the field of interpreting, solutions to the challenges faced in interpreter training can be uncovered and assimilated into the learning environments. It is hoped that the trainees learning the skills will be part of those who “behave like experts” and contribute to the expansion of expert interpreters—a force to be reckoned with.

Within the Malaysian context, the sustainability of the interpreting industry relies heavily on the visibility of the profession. People’s naïve thinking, that there couldn’t be anything to be learned in the field, as well as an unprofessional way of providing services, results in unprofessional treatment toward interpreters. Training should provide the necessary elements for candidates to become interpreters who are ready to provide services professionally, and consequently, eliminate this perception as well as the unprofessional responses from the
By being aware of the issues related to the training of interpreters, steps have been made that have resulted in overall improvements, particularly in terms of the methods and materials of teaching. The changes have made the program more attractive to more highly qualified candidates and have encouraged more graduates to venture into the field of translating/interpreting. By doing so, they are making the profession one that is more easily recognized and well regarded by the general public.

8. References


