

Teaching Interpretation

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Abstract

It has long been taken for granted that anyone who knows a language can translate to and from that language and that the ability to translate comes automatically after one has mastered the comprehension and expression skills of listening, reading, speaking and writing. This paper will tell you otherwise. It will discuss the principle requirements of translation and interpretation and will attempt to show the reader that basic language skills only serve the primary purpose of providing base for the development of translation and interpretation skills. It will then go on to discuss methods and techniques employed in teaching interpretation and the problems encountered in the interpretation classroom. Due to its brevity, it is aimed solely to serve the purpose of providing introduction for newcomers to the interpretation sphere.

Quite often the term interpretation is taken as a reference to artistic interpretation of messages and motives intended by an artist and embedded in a work of art. The focus of this paper, although distinctly related to art and nonetheless requiring artistic input, is another kind of interpretation; more conveniently described as the oral translation of a message from one language to another language at the instance (or immediately after) it is uttered. Interpretation is kin to written translation and yet so different in practice.

Interpretation and translation share the same basic principles but the input and output are distributed through different modes. To translate, one must first understand, and likewise, to interpret one must also understand (Seleskovitch, 1978). The basic concept of decoding and encoding message in translation and interpretation are the same. In translation, the message is usually read while in interpretation, the message is usually heard. Nevertheless, after that first intake of message, the translator and interpreter both have to strip it of all linguistic packaging and delve down into the genuine substance of what was intended by the writer or speaker. At this stage, there is a time difference. The translator may have all the time he needs to comprehend his message but the interpreter has fleeting seconds to accomplish this task. Once an abstract understanding has been established by both the translator and interpreter, they need to select the appropriate language casing to pack up their message and send it on its way to readers or to an audience. One will note that the inherent distinction between translation and interpretation is the time factor and mode of delivery. Because of this difference, interpretation needs to be taught as a different subject separate from translation; yet it relies on the employment of translation skills to be successfully performed.

Although interpretation basically refers to the act of orally translating a spoken message, it is carried out in different ways and different places. The first interpreters were probably liaison interpreters who translated messages consecutively but today, with the growing number of international bodies, international/regional forums and international agreements, we see more and more the emergence of conference interpreting. At this point, it is useful to present the reader with a quote from Joseph Danks (1997) in an attempt to describe the various modes and types of interpretation currently employed.

Interpretation occurs in two main versions. In both of them, input as well as output consists of speech, but the two differ in the timing of the input and the output relative to one another. In simultaneous interpretation, the interpreter listens and speaks at the same time most of the time. In contrast, in consecutive interpretation, the interpreter alternates between listening and speaking. The person delivering the speech speaks for a while, during which the interpreter listens (and generally takes notes); only when the speaker finishes does the interpreter take the floor. (p. 26)

Categorized by mode of delivery, there is consecutive interpretation when the interpreter speaks only after the speaker has finished and simultaneous interpretation where the interpreter speaks at the same time as the speaker. Categorized by venue, there is liaison interpreting where the interpreter accompanies the client and translates to as well as for him, there is court interpreting where the interpreter translates for a party appearing in court and lastly, there is conference interpreting where the interpreter translates in a conference setting. Liaison interpreting is mostly performed consecutively, although there is electronic equipment that makes it possible to translate simultaneously in this situation. Court interpreting is also performed consecutively only since accuracy of translation is significant to the court hearing and trial and since it is very important to be able to refer back to the original utterance. Conference interpreting is usually performed simultaneously as it is more time efficient and enables the discussion to flow more naturally although there are some cases where the conference is more informal or the number of delegates attending is relatively small and consecutive interpretation is used.

In practice, the most outstanding difference between translation and interpretation lies in the time factor and the fact that interpretation requires the simultaneous employment of two or three skills which we do not normally make use of at the same time. From childhood through to our college years, we have practiced the skill of listening and writing at the same time. This skill is greatly enhanced through attending classroom lectures and note-taking. For interpretation, interpreters who write their notes verbatim are at a disadvantage to those who write down notes in their own words. In order to formulate one's own wording and sentence structure and re-write the message one has listened to, one must first understand the message. As earlier mentioned, understanding is one of the most significant steps in the translation process. Verbatim notes are just exact duplicates of what has been said. When the interpreter has to produce an oral translation of the message, he will, at that instance, need more time to establish an understanding before he can say his message. On the contrary, if the note has been written according to the interpreter's understanding, in his own words, the understanding part will have already been accomplished when it is time to deliver the message and the interpreter will have saved himself from the stress needlessly generated by time constraint. Note-taking and paraphrasing are the first skills to be taught in an interpreting course. Students will also need to possess the ability to listen and understand as a pre-requirement to studying interpretation but listening skills are already amply taught in many basic language courses.

One skill that is never taught in any language course but is greatly required for simultaneous interpretation is the skill of listening, understanding, and speaking at the same time. The simultaneous employment of all three skills is explained by the following diagram by Chanprapun (1999, p. 32):

Sequence 1	Listen to incoming message 1		
Sequence 2	Listen to incoming message 2	Deverbalize message 1	
Sequence 3	Listen to incoming message 3	Deverbalize message 2	Reexpress message 1
Sequence 4	Listen to incoming message 4	Deverbalize message 3	Reexpress message 2

This is an area of attention needed for the training of simultaneous interpreters. Listening, thinking, and speaking at the same time is somehow similar to driving a manual shift car where one has to look ahead (or sometimes behind), take hold of the steering wheel, release the clutch pedal and press the accelerator pedal all at the same time. Students are usually comforted when this comparison is made because they know that with enough practice, they will be able to master the skill one day just like when they learned to drive. To assist them, exercises that demand the simultaneous employment of contrasting skills is used, i.e., they may be assigned to count or say the letters of the alphabet backwards, or they may be asked to listen to a speech and orally paraphrase (not translate) that speech simultaneously.

When we talk about language comprehension, we tend to focus more on the language skills that are needed to understand language input. However, another equally important factor for message comprehension is content knowledge about the subject matter. We cannot thoroughly understand the sentence, "John was sitting in his car." without the content knowledge about cars. With our language knowledge we know that John was sitting in *something*, but if we have never seen what a car looks like or if we have never known what a car is used for, we will not be able to comprehend the message in its entirety. There is a general misconception that translation can be accomplished with language skill solely. Such is not the case, and this is the reason why interpretation students are assigned research tasks on a broad variety of topics of current public interest. In Thailand, these topics include government, economics, science, and intellectual property, just to mention a few prominent ones. Also, there is a tendency for language students to overlook the importance of current affairs, and most of them will benefit greatly from these assignments; for example, in the field of intellectual property, they will have the opportunity to find out the differences between a trademark, a patent and a copyright. It is essential for interpreters to have content knowledge about the subject matter they are translating and it is essential to expose interpretation students to these contents.

The core of translating is extracting meaning and restating that same message in another language. When a message is uttered, it is wrapped in language, which is a set of codes agreed upon by the community that uses it. The interpreting student

needs to learn to extract the genuine message or meaning in its abstract form, free from any interference from the source or target language. Both translation and interpretation share this principle. Without strict adherence to this principle, translation would be a mere word-pairing process. Admittedly, there is always a tendency for translators to pair up words because the practice has become common. In fact, translators should sometimes pair up words like proper names and technical terms, but the heart of translation lies in the extraction of meaning devoid of language packaging and re-expressing it in another language to mean what it meant in the source language. The skill of meaning extraction is practiced simultaneously with the listening comprehension and note-taking skills.

In any translation, re-expressing the message is as equally important as establishing an understanding of its meaning. The skill of re-expression, or the speaking skill, is also taught in interpretation class but the focus is more set on delivering content oriented messages. As students are assigned to do research on current interest topics, they are asked to speak on those topics, more to say what other people said than to express their own ideas. This situation may sound odd to the academic community. Indeed, after being exposed to such a variety of subject matter, students have much to say about what they think, and their opinions are ultimately discussed in class. However, one principle in translation is never to allow one's opinion to interfere with the translation.

Most of the teaching and learning is done through practice. The course begins with an explanation of the translation principles and as most interpretation students have studied translation before, it is inevitable that a comparison of the differences and similarities between translation and interpretation be made. Topic research assignments are given throughout the entire course, and class time is divided into half for discussion on content and techniques and half for practice. The content primarily discussed is the basic understanding on an issue and related vocabulary in both the source and target languages. A typical teaching unit begins with a discussion intended to introduce the students to the topic and to familiarize them with any technical terms. Students are then assigned to conduct further research on the subject matter and present their findings orally. Sight translation exercises, in which learners translate orally from written texts, are used along side paraphrasing. In the actual translation step, students watch a video tape or listen to an audio tape and translate from that source. Their rendition is recorded on audio tape and feedback is given by their classmates and the teacher. Most students would like to have more than one chance to translate a rendition. Occasionally, they are given a second or third chance to translate the same speeches but most of the time students would prepare to translate by listening to other speeches with similar content matter before actually translating the core speech of the unit.

Concentration and confidence are two important elements to the success of any interpretation work. Many students find it frustrating that they are not able to perform well in interpretation despite the fact that their performance has been excellent in most of their other classes. This situation is not surprising because they are just beginning something that is entirely new to them, and although good language skill is required for interpretation, the ability to translate well is more predominant. The most prominent problem for interpretation students is the lack of re-expression skill. Most often, students understand the message that is rendered but are at a loss for words on how to restate it. This happens even when translating from a second

language to their mother tongue. The language skill is not lacking in this case but a lack of expression power, the power to say something in a credible manner. Confidence and maturity help considerably in this situation but it is not a simple thing to teach one's students to be confident and mature, is it?

Indeed the misconception continues that if one is a fluent speaker of a foreign language, one can be a successful interpreter between that language and one's native tongue. Much more needs to be elaborated as to what makes a competent interpreter or what makes interpretation successful (more space than this paper will allow) but with the spreading trend of globalization, more interpreters will ultimately be required as will the need to train them. It is, however, worth noting at this juncture that good interpretation relies not only on language ability but on one's translation logic as well.

References

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