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Training Interpreters— Past, Present, and Future

EVER SINCE the formal education of interpreters began, educators have been trying to determine what to teach in order to produce entry-level interpreters who achieve the minimum level of competence needed to perform their jobs successfully. Etilvia Arjona, former director of the translation and interpretation program at the Monterey Institute of International Studies, suggested that interpreter training programs should take students to levels in which they “routinely transfer or interpret the message accurately and appropriately, thus bridging the communicative gap in a meaningful manner” (1983, 6). The notion that beginning interpreters should be able to consistently convey accurate and appropriate messages—no matter what the situation or event—is intriguing. Nevertheless, this concept is consistent with the way that other professions construct their educational programs. How best to teach students a body of knowledge, as well as a professional skill, that adequately meets entry-level requirements is a question most interpreter-training programs are still trying to answer.

One problem is a profession-wide lack of agreement about what constitutes a basic, or generic, interpreted meeting and what an interpreter must know and be able to do to participate in an appropriate way. Training programs typically base courses and curricula on theories borrowed from translation studies, spoken-language training exercises, and information-processing techniques. They also practice interpreting as it is done in specialized settings such as schools, doctors’ offices, and courtrooms. Interpreting courses, consciously or unconsciously, are designed around the concept of an

interpreter as a producer of a *text*—a singular, bounded entity of words, sentences, or signs. In such a framework, the correctness (or equivalence) of the text is central, speakers are secondary, and listeners are typically anonymous. Interpreters are—and students learn to think of themselves as—passive conveyors of others' words and thoughts. Most programs accept this set of beliefs about an interpreter's role and pay little, if any, attention to the nature of interpreted situations or to the other participants within such situations.

When educators do have a chance to gather and discuss training, they rarely discuss fundamental notions such as those just considered. Rather, they present teaching activities at conferences, which permit only a brief exchange of ideas or activities. Extended discussion, practice, and evaluation are precluded by time constraints. These activities are often presented as random teaching strategies, without grounding in theoretical notions of language, or in interaction among people, or in connections to research. Instructors who take home “new” ideas are often unable to determine their place in a curriculum, and they do not have a sequential, scaffolding learning structure that allows them to incorporate the “new” activity and then proceed to the next stage. Courses thus become haphazard strings of exercises and activities that lack a clear purpose.

However, when educators have advanced training in language study, such as linguistics, and are also researchers, formulating studies to answer questions about learning, their teaching expertise combines with acquired knowledge. They grow professionally as teachers and report that their teaching improves with a new awareness of why students learn the way they do. When successful teachers—those who base their teaching strategies on theory and research—are invited to demonstrate and discuss their own best practices, the profession benefits from their insight and expertise.

An educational reform movement already in practice in the United States—the National Writing Project—elicits the best techniques of classroom teachers and asks them to connect their practice to theory and research. This successful professional development model can also work for teachers of interpreters. Thus the contributors in this book each share a teaching practice that they consider particularly effective with their students.

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF ASL/ENGLISH INTERPRETER TRAINING

The first collegiate sign language interpreter-training programs were established in the mid-1970s and were located in speech communication or deaf education programs in universities or community colleges. Most programs started with one or two interpreter training classes, usually taught by individuals who were experienced interpreters but who had little or no advanced academic training in related fields. The curricula of such programs developed gradually. Most started by teaching sign language, whether American Sign Language (ASL) or contact signing. After a year or more, students were deemed ready to begin interpreter training regardless of their general level of education, their abilities in English, or their exposure to Deaf adults or children.

As these programs developed, linguistic discoveries defining American Sign Language as a language with the same descriptive and structural levels as spoken languages emerged. During the 1970s and 1980s, linguists described grammatical structure in ASL that was so new and interesting that it became the main focus of teaching interpreting. Now that ASL and English were defined as two *languages* across which interpreters worked, educators began to look at spoken-language interpreter training and noted that in those programs students had to possess a high degree of fluency in *both* languages as well as a broad, liberal-arts background. At interpreting conferences and in newsletters, educators began to call not only for greater fluency in ASL but also a fluency indicative of heightened mastery in spoken English (McIntire 1980; Yoken 1979). At that time, the only way to raise the level of mastery or fluency in both languages and to obtain a liberal arts background was through university bachelor-degree programs.

However, many programs remained at the community-college level. Because community colleges have open-admission policies, fluency in either ASL or English could neither be required nor achieved in two years. Universities also allowed students who had no fluency in ASL to enter interpreting programs but then had to focus a great deal of attention on teaching ASL. In many such programs,

beginning interpreting classes were actually advanced ASL classes. That meant, practically speaking, that the interpreter-training segment was really a program of increasing fluency. Bringing students to adequate levels of fluency consumed so much program time that few instructors had to consider what they would teach a student who was fluent in ASL and had an adequate command of English. In addition, the texts used for interpreting practice focused on storytelling rather than the type of talk interpreting consumers would use in a doctor's or a social security office.

When students eventually moved into interpreting classes and attempted interpreting to and from English, vocabulary and sentences were the focus—they learned which signs were “conceptually accurate” for specific English words, phrases, and sentences. Decisions about meaning focused on the word level and the production of an interpreted message that accurately mirrored the source message. Although easier for students with little training in linguistics (Baker 1992, 6), this approach—taking words and phrases as starting points for defining units of meaning—is not in line with current understanding of the nature of discourse, meaning, and interaction between communicants (Goffman 1981, Gumperz 1982, Wadensjö 1998). In fact, it contributes to the faulty notion that words (or signs) in and of themselves have meanings that do not change over the course of an interpretation and can be transformed with only a dictionary knowledge of a language. Although words have meanings as they stand alone in a dictionary-type, static sense, they begin to acquire multiple, layered meanings the minute they are exchanged, connected to experiences, and used by people within specific situations and times.

When interpreting skills were taught specifically, instructors employed a methodology of successive approximation, according to which students were provided with texts, either spoken English or ASL, and were expected to produce simultaneous interpretation from the outset of their training (rather than acquiring this complex skill in stages). The goal of this sort of training was to gradually improve the degree to which a student's target language product approximated a quality interpretation.

Although many of the instructors were community interpreters, the bulk of whose interpreting consisted of interaction among three participants, courses were structured as though conference (or platform) interpreting were the typical model of interpreting. When interpreting for a single speaker, the focus is on the informational content of a message. Thus courses came to emphasize primarily details of the message's surface form rather than the communicative situation as a whole. Accordingly, teaching then focused on accuracy and speed.

Cognitive psychologists and psycholinguists, whose central area of interest was language processing and transference, conducted much of the early research on interpreting. Focusing on the complexity of the tasks of simultaneously listening, understanding, reformulating, and speaking, this research produced detailed models of the cognitive stages necessary to perform the task of interpreting (Gerver 1976; Moser 1978; Cokely 1984). Research into cognitive processes involved hypothesizing about what went on in the minds of interpreters, which often resulted in the application of deductive, experimental, or quasi-experimental research. The logic behind such studies concentrates on omissions and distortions, asking questions such as *What gets lost?* and *What gets added?* Studies with this orientation thus prescribed what interpreters *ought* to be doing and saying. Success or failure was defined as the degree to which the interpreted message approximated the source message rather than whether the participants perceived the event as successful and whether the task of a meeting was accomplished.

This perspective misses the complex ways in which talk is dynamic, going back and forth between two or more speakers while they ask questions, argue, complain, or joke. Also missed is the dynamic activity during which the interpreter assists this exchange and manages the direction and flow of talk. Imagined listeners—and their responses and expectations—are not considered or assigned any importance. Talk as text is removed from the natural process of ordinary conversation and conversational features such as two speakers talking at the same time, one speaker correcting a misunderstanding, or one speaker talking directly to an interpreter.

Elsewhere I have attributed this way of thinking to everyday perceptions about language and communication (Roy 1989, 1993) and to what Reddy (1979) calls the *conduit model* of language and communication. These conduit metaphors, used to describe the role and function of an interpreter, reveal an underlying perception of the interpreter's role as passive and neutral. These metaphors blind researchers and educators to a concept of the interpreter as a conversational participant who has an impact on a situation and almost obscure the impact individual speakers have on the situation.

Arjona was one of the first educators to base a program on the notion that "the translation [or interpreting] process is considered as taking place within a situational/cultural context that is, in itself, an integral part of the process and that must be considered in order to bridge, in a meaningful manner, the gap that separates both sender and receptor audiences. This transfer must encompass the unique linguistic, paralinguistic, and logic systems for interpersonal communication of both sender and receptor audiences" (1978, 36). Hers was the first program to consider the basic problems of communication, understanding, misunderstanding, and nonunderstanding. At the 1982 Conference of Interpreter Trainers (CIT), Arjona urged a task analysis of the interpreter's performance in order to build a curriculum that taught the task in a sequential and developmental order. At the next CIT conference, a task analysis was distributed, and attendees contributed to a lengthy list of various cognitive and personal tasks required to interpret (McIntire 1984). The major components were based on cognitive processes for which spoken language interpreter-training programs had developed exercises. Although programs were influenced to begin using some of these teaching strategies, such as shadowing, paraphrasing, dual-tasking, and ways to increase lag time, these strategies emerged from programs that trained conference interpreters and thus reemphasized a textual view of a speaker's production and the interpreted rendition.

As the decade progressed, educators turned to issues of power and identity, issues of teamwork, and specific interpreting types, such as educational and legal interpreting. In an age when the rights of

minorities and issues of language oppression were of central concern, the bilingual, bicultural label came into widespread use. The problem with such a label, however, is that it never dispels the assumed model of interpreting and continues to focus on two independent, yet related, texts. This persistent model of a single speaker and an interpreter who conveys the content message has several inherent problems:

1. The focus is on the relaying of the message as the sole purpose of the interpreter and the participant who produces the message;
2. Talk as a way of doing something (such as informing, explaining, or complaining) is overlooked;
3. This approach cannot account for other conversation-related activities that are not a part of either text.

Thus the bilingual, bicultural label did not take us away from a basic conceptual notion of interpreting as relaying text that can then be judged as correct, appropriate, and equivalent. For example, in a 1998 issue of *Views*, the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf newsletter, Hoza (an interpreter educator) posed the dilemma of a doctor, during a medical examination, asking the interpreter a direct question that was not about the medical interview itself or the patient but rather a conversational query about how the interpreter had learned sign language. Hoza suggested that when an interpreter is asked such direct questions by a participant, the issue is an ethical one having to do with where an interpreter's loyalties lie. Although teachers would agree that interpreting students need to know how to resolve ethical dilemmas, the difficulty posed here is actually an ordinary conversational occurrence common in medical interviews even when no interpreter is present. In medical exams, when a patient is otherwise occupied (dressing or having a temperature taken), a doctor may turn to other people in the room and make "small talk." Common sense suggests that this occurs naturally, and research on interpreters in such settings suggests that, rather than a protracted relay between participants, a brief response from an interpreter actually minimizes the interpreter's participation in a

situation in which the focus should remain on the primary participants (Metzger 1995). Although Hoza's discussion noted the situational context in which the question was asked, the discussion that followed in no way accounted for ways in which people participate in medical interviews, nor did it query the intentions or expectations of any of the speakers in this event. Rather, the focus was on the question—the text—which demonstrates the underlying assumptions of interpreting as a textual problem without considering the reciprocal nature of conversation, the purpose of asking questions, and the expectations and performance of all the participants.

Neglected is the interactive nature of most interpreting situations and the complex nature of meaning produced by human beings who are purposely interacting. An approach that emphasizes discourse and interaction understands that people use language to do things and that language always occurs within specific situations that are composed of linguistic, social, and interactive conventions as well as conversational styles and attributes. In a discourse approach, for example, the question "Can I help you?" does not have the same meaning, and thus the same interpretation, when uttered by a receptionist, a secretary, and a bank vice-president. The meaning of this relatively simple question clearly depends on several factors, such as the status of the persons uttering the question, their reasons for asking, and their expectations for a response.

A NEW APPROACH

Researchers increasingly realized that interpreting is an active process of communicating between two languages and cultures and that theoretical frameworks of social interaction, sociolinguistics, and discourse analysis are more appropriate for analyzing the task of interpreting. My own study (Roy 1989) demonstrated that an interpreter actively participated in an interpreted event and made several decisions in regard to taking turns within a teacher-student exchange. Wadensjö (1992) demonstrated that interpreters are asked direct questions, and they answer them, ask for clarification, and participate in the process, while Metzger (1995) demonstrated that

when an interpreter responds briefly to a direct question, the interpreter's effect on the communication is minimal.

This perspective in research (and teaching) explores the social order of real-life interpreter-mediated conversations. It tries to detect what people in these situations expect as the adequate (should we say "correct?") way to act, given the immediate situation. It asks what norms of language use are valid in a given conversational event and what norms are valid for which persons and why. As Wadensjö suggests, "For instance, what communicative conventions are involved when an interpreter, talking on behalf of another person, suddenly switches from 'I' to an emphasized 'she'?" (1998, 5).

The starting point for this research is speech activities or, as Wadensjö (1998) suggests, speech genres, situated in their sociocultural context. These concepts come from the work of sociolinguists such as John Gumperz (1982), sociologist Erving Goffman (1981), language philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin (1986), and others. From these theoretical explanations of the nature of conversational interaction, recent interpreting research has begun to seek participants' perspectives, "trying to find out what meaning *they* attribute to particular words; how phrases and stretches of talk make sense to different actors in situated events" (Wadensjö 1998, 7). This approach forces the perspective of interpreting as "dynamic inter-activity" (Wadensjö 1998, 7). And this perspective asks how *all* the participants are making sense of what they are talking about, of what they are doing with talk. Interactional analysis then analyzes the ways in which participants use language and discourse strategies and how they use both language and strategies differently. Within this analysis, words and longer phrases are simply one part of the whole picture.

This perspective sees talk as an *activity* in which participants determine minute-by-minute the meaning of something that is said. This means that speakers and interpreters process information at several levels. At any one point in a conversation, participants rely on schemata or interpretive frames (Bateson 1982; Gumperz 1982; Tannen 1979) based on their experiences with similar situations as well as grammatical and lexical knowledge. In doing this speakers (and interpreters) rely on their knowledge of both variation and

ritual in language to interpret the significance of conversational options. When people engage in interpreter-mediated interaction, they see themselves as doing things, such as asking for information, explaining, making a request, arguing, and so on. As participants talk back and forth, the meaning they assign to various words and phrases becomes something they compose together, and all participants work to make sense of the talk. Words and utterances have meanings and functions within layers of context, layers that are particular to the individual situation and to generalizable, recurring situations. What participants say and mean can be understood only when considered as part of a reciprocal process among the individuals present.

Acknowledging that interpreting is a discourse process in which interpreters are active participants who need to know about and understand interactional behavior as well as explicit ways in which languages and cultures use language changes our perception of what interpreters do. That is, interpreters make intentional, informed choices from a range of possibilities. This altered perspective on how interpreters actually accomplish their task will bring about a change in educational practice. It suggests that what is significant in the process of learning to interpret is understanding the nature of social situations, being conscious of discourse processes, and knowing and recognizing ways of using language. Because these processes and an interpreter's role are ineluctably bound to language and patterns of discourse, discourse analysis offers not only a new research framework and a more accurate perception of a basic interpreted interaction but also a new understanding of the important aspects of teaching interpreting.

THE STRUCTURE OF THIS BOOK

As many curriculum specialists have noted, curriculum involves putting into practice a set of beliefs concerning how people learn, what they should be learning, and the contexts that will support that learning (Short and Burke 1991). The practices explained in this book come from a set of beliefs about the nature of interpreting, the sequence in which people learn to interpret, and what students

should learn. Students in these programs study interpreting as a sociocultural-linguistic process that cannot be separated from either the language or its speakers.

As interpreters, researchers, and educators, the contributors to this volume each share one teaching practice that works in their classroom and is supported by current knowledge, research, and theory about how one learns to interpret. Each of their practices assumes that students learn to interpret effectively and fluently by becoming consciously aware of and in control of language processes. These practices are distinguished by the fact that they are drawn from research on language, learning, and interpreting. Successful teaching practices work for a reason, and making the connection to that reason is the basis of curriculum development.

In chapter 2 Winston and Monikowski explain *discourse mapping*, an application of discourse analysis that provides students with analytical experience so that their interpretations are effective. These interpretations are accurate in content, socially appropriate, and linguistically accurate. Discourse mapping is a strategy that teaches students to develop a mental picture of the meaning of a message. By doing so, students can reconstruct a similar map to produce an interpretation and can see the relationships of context, form, and content. Mapping is similar to techniques in reading and writing instruction and is referred to as concept mapping, mind mapping, or idea mapping. Discourse mapping also helps instructors choose more appropriate texts for students by highlighting the structure of themes within a text and the approach of the speaker.

In chapter 3 Pollitt explains the use of critical discourse analysis (CDA), a type of discourse analysis widely used in Europe. CDA sees discourse as ways in which speakers use language to portray their identities and alliances to the various cultures to which they belong. Because speakers use discourse to do things, critical discourse analysis allows researchers to pick apart what speakers say and reveal some of the influences and beliefs that shape their lives and the way they use language.

Metzger, in chapter 4, describes how to implement quality, interactive role-plays so that students learn strategies for switching back and forth rapidly between languages, for managing features of

interaction (such as overlap), and for making relevant contributions to the interaction (such as indicating the source of an utterance). Her chapter includes how to prepare for role-plays, how to implement them, and how to give effective feedback.

In chapter 5 Davis describes the translation skills that form the basis for teaching consecutive interpreting, after which students move into simultaneous interpreting. Teaching translation skills is useful in moving students beyond the lexical and phrasal level to deeper levels of semantics and pragmatics. These strategies help students understand not only the intended meaning of the source message but also the manner in which the listeners are likely to understand the message.

In chapter 6 Peterson describes the use of recall protocols as both an instructional technique and as a metric for student comprehension of ASL discourse. In many sign language interpreting programs, students need further language learning, especially in ASL. Recall protocols can be used to teach metacognitive skills as well as to assess comprehension. A sample recall is provided, together with sample scoring.

In chapter 7 Humphrey explains her program's use of graduation portfolios to indicate a student's mastery (or lack of mastery) of the program outcomes identified by the faculty. Students compile written and videotaped evidence to demonstrate their readiness to enter the field of ASL/English interpretation; the resulting portfolio is assessed by a team of three individuals: a faculty member, a professional interpreter, and a member of the Deaf community. The team evaluates the portfolio and then recommends the student for graduation or remediation.

IT IS our hope that interpreting instructors will implement the practices explained in this book and that they, in turn, will demonstrate and discuss their own best practices. The field of interpreter education will benefit from tapping that particular knowledge of how to teach interpreting that comes from both theory and practice. In this process we will gain strength and become less defensive and more open. Such an atmosphere of trust breeds honest dialogue and a

breaking down of traditional barriers, and, as a result, teachers can work together as mutually respected colleagues.

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