Sign and spoken language interpreting: A componential approach to skills develop

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Based on my many years of experience in American Sign Language interpreting and interpreter education I am pleased to share some insights with you. Some may think there are many important differences between signed and spoken language interpreting. However the underlying processes of interpretation are overwhelmingly similar regardless of language pair. There are many more similarities than differences in comparing signed and spoken language interpreting. In either signed or spoken language interpreting, messages are conveyed from one language to another. (Yes, American Sign Language is a language; no, it is not universal.)

The main differences center on modality. Spoken language interpreters rely on aural/oral approaches while signed language interpreters rely on aural/oral and manual/visual modalities.

You may also be interested in knowing about organizations related to signed language interpreting. The Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) was established in 1984 and is a membership organization of over 10,000 members that certifies and provides a certification maintenance program. In addition, RID publishes The Journal of Interpretation, a research-based publication, and The Views, a monthly newsletter. For more information about RID go to www.rid.org

Another important organization is the Conference of Interpreter Trainers (CIT). CIT was established 25 years ago and is a professional organization of interpreter educators that promotes high standards in interpreter education, sharing of information, and advocates for research relevant to the practice of interpreter education. CIT has an exciting conference planned for late September 2004 in Washington, D.C. and we welcome interpreter educators and interpreters from foreign signed and spoken languages. On the website http://www.cit-asl.org/, you will find specifics about the upcoming convention and other information about CIT including interpreter preparation program review, interpreter preparation program standards, a link to past convention proceedings, and other topics. Consider joining us.

One of the challenges that CIT has faced is to analyze the components of the interpreting process and provide these ideas to interpreter trainers. Over time, materials have been developed that follow a task-based, componential approach to interpreter education. I have used this approach in creating The Effective Interpreting Series which is a series of teacher’s guides and textbooks for interpreter education. An excerpt from The Effective Interpreting Series: Simultaneous Interpreting (in press) is provided here and illustrates a componential approach to interpreter education.
Simultaneous interpreting is a very complex skill that requires intensive and appropriate practice. Successful interpreters rely on many skills in their everyday work. The development of these skills is not intuitive or automatic. Simultaneous interpreting must be developed through a careful sequence of learning activities. Isolating specific skills and learning them one at a time is the best approach to learning complex new skills. Learning new skills one at a time allows mastery of individual skills and a feeling of success. Gaining control over components of the interpretation process can assist in developing simultaneous interpreting skills because appropriate practice helps to routinize these complex skills. The skills that make up the simultaneous interpreting processes are generally not used in isolation and must be synthesized correctly in order to render an interpretation.

Component skills for simultaneous interpreting are interactive and interdependent. The learning process should begin with strengthening skills in your first language (L1) and move in a carefully structured sequence from intra-lingual skill development to inter-lingual development. The first four volumes in the Effective Interpreting Series provide English source materials and exercises that focus on cognitive processing, English skills development, translation, and consecutive interpreting. This volume provides practice materials designed to develop simultaneous interpreting skills from English to any other language.

Before studying simultaneous interpreting students must have high levels of intralingual skills. Drills and skills in the student’s first language (L1) are often overlooked and neglected in interpreter education programs. This may be due to the enormous amount of material that must be covered in the interpreter education curriculum, leaving little time for ongoing development of L1 skills. It is absolutely essential that interpreter educators take a strong stand on developing L1 skills in potential interpreters before attempting to develop interlingual skills such as translating or interpreting.

In addition to above-average L1 proficiency skills, interpreters must have excellent cognitive manipulation skills. Intralingual skills and cognitive manipulation skills underlie the more complex skill of simultaneous interpreting. Interpreters must be able to do several cognitive tasks simultaneously. Sometimes the ability to do several things at once is called dual tasking but that term is misleading. A more accurate term for simultaneously managing a variety of processes is multitasking. There are many things the interpreter must attend to during the simultaneous interpretation process. Among the myriad of cognitive tasks are comprehension and analysis of the incoming message, the transfer of the message to the target language, the expression of the source language message in target language, and finally the monitoring of the outgoing message for accuracy. If the monitoring process reveals that the interpretation is skewed, the interpretation is revised within the time constraints of the process and abilities of the interpreter.

Basic Assumptions about Interpreter Education

Effective interpreter education relies on a carefully integrated sequence of instructional units that provide access to control of interpretation processes. In 1984 the Conference of Interpreter Trainers (CIT) began the process of documenting a task-based approach to teaching and learning interpretation. Based on these works and others, the importance of sequencing instructional materials and experiences that are supportive of cognitive development in adults is clear. Additionally, interpreter education programs must be responsive to the language communities they serve. “Clearly the type of training given to interpreting students should be suited to the realities of the job market.” (Kurz, 2002, p. 66).

There are several assumptions about the order of difficulty of learning tasks that form the basis of this work. These assumptions are derived from the work of many educators who have published
their work via the Conference of Interpreter Trainers, the American Translators Association, the John Benjamin’s Translation Library, or in other sources.

The first assumption is that tasks that are relatively less cognitively demanding should appear in the curriculum and be mastered prior to tasks that are more demanding. The second assumption is that mastery of tasks at a certain level indicates readiness to move to a more difficult level. The third assumption is that training should proceed from intralingual exercises that may be taught concurrently with cognitive skills, to translation.

The Component Processes

This work is also based on the assumption that simultaneous interpreting can be separated into its components for study purposes and that doing so builds a strong cognitive and procedural foundation for interpreting. In the words of Fabbro and Gran ‘learning simultaneous interpreting, as is true for any other skill, is a gradual process. Thus we should always consider the actual level at which our students are working, rather than think in terms of the ideal level we wish them to attain.” (Riccardi 2002, p. 117). Simultaneous interpreting is not a linear sequence of skills that are performed one at a time. Rather, simultaneous interpreting is a complex series of interacting skills and processes. It can be overwhelming and ineffective to try to master all the skills and processes at once. Most research on the cognitive aspects of interpretation has been done to help us better understand the processes.

“From the time simultaneous interpreting stopped being viewed as sheer alchemy and turned into something worth studying and dissecting, we have been trying to devise ways of finding out what actually happens in the interpreters mind as s/he goes about performing this unusual task.” (Shlesinger 2000, p. 3). Recently developed interpreter training curricula are based on the assumption that it is possible to separate the processes of interpretation into distinct components and that doing so enhances learning. At the same time there is some concern among researchers as to whether the simultaneous interpreting process can be separated into component parts. Shlesinger (2000) points out that in decomposing or isolating the tasks, the simultaneity of the process is lost. “SI clearly involves meaningful, contextualized materials and any attempt to “tamper” with these is regarded by some as defeating the very purpose of research. In fact strictly speaking the processing of discourse in SI is apt to be affected not only by the immediately preceding units of text but by the text-in-situation, the setting, the circumstances and the interpreter’s knowledge of the situation as a whole, which s/he applies as an integrated ensemble of strategic bottom-up/top-down processes.” (p.6). This argument lends support to the importance of creating a context for all interpreting exercises. Interpretations never occur in a vacuum. They are always affected by the context, including the setting and participants and logistical factors.

Shlesinger (2000) explains that simultaneous interpreting may actually be a combination of acquired proceduralized strategies and cognitive processes. “…we confront the seeming impossibility of unraveling raw cognitive resources from acquired, automatized strategies. This said, it may be more effective and wiser, to focus on refining a paradigm which studies simultaneous interpreting as a junction, par excellence, of the two.”(p.9)

Massaro & Shlesinger (1997) caution that because simultaneous interpreting is such a complex task we may never be able to achieve a full understanding of all the components of the process and how they interact. They explain that there are many cognitive variables that cannot be fully isolated from each other, even for purposes of study, so it is difficult to determine how the variables affect each other and even more difficult to say how experimental studies on aspects of simultaneous interpreting can affect the entire process. Add to this complexity, the fact that each person brings many linguistic and non-linguistic variables to the task and it becomes clear that it may never be
fully obvious what each stage of the interpreting process involves. These authors suggest that there are “four classes of variables to consider; the interpreter, his or her training and performance history, the interpreting situation, and the interpreting requirements.” (p. 15). Because there are so many variables in so many possible combinations, it is most productive to study within a concise framework when developing simultaneous interpreting skills.

Frauenfelder and Schriefers (1997) suggest that it is possible and even desirable to isolate specific tasks within the interpreting process. It is more effective to learn how to master the components and then learn to synthesize the skills and processes during the simultaneous interpreting process. For a more in-depth look at the cognitive processes in simultaneous interpreting, see Tapping and Mapping the Processes of Translation and Interpreting: Outlooks on Empirical Research. (2000) By Tirkkonen-Condit and Jaaskelainen.

When control of the sub-processes in simultaneous interpreting is developed and available, then there is a much higher chance that the resulting interpretation will be accurate. This control of sub-processes addresses the interpreter’s training and performance history, one of the four variables mentioned by Frauenfelder and Schriefers (1997). When more advanced skills do not have a firm base, more effortful processing is required during the interpretation process. (Gile, 1995) When more effortful processing is needed, then the likelihood of fatigue is increased. Increased fatigue leads to a corresponding increase in errors in interpretation.  

DeGroot (2000) summarizes the importance of acquiring skill in the components of the simultaneous interpretation process while in training. A componential approach means studying the processes within interpreting and then synthesizing those processes. DeGroot says that training programs that are based on training complex skills in a holistic fashion are based in fallacy.”

Individuals and programs that have used the componential approach in interpreter education have been reporting improved student outcomes and overall gains in interpreting skills. Interpreter education is advancing on many fronts. There are many new research studies we can use as a foundation for our work in interpreting and interpreter education. I welcome your comments on this article or on The Effective Interpreting Series.

References


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