Applying language skills to interpretation
Student perspectives from signed and spoken language programs

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Interpreter Education Programs (IEPs) frequently encounter a dilemma when attempting to assist students who have completed a second-language learning sequence in their transition to interpreter education. Typically, students exhibit difficulties making this transition when they perceive their language base is inadequate to successfully complete the interpreting sequence in their program. This investigation was designed to (a) explore factors that contribute to or inhibit readiness to apply language skills to interpretation, and (b) identify similarities and differences between students’ perspectives of this transition in the context of signed language and spoken language interpretation programs. The Interpreter Education Program (American Sign Language/English) at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, USA conducted this study in collaboration with the Institute of Theoretical and Applied Translation Studies at the Karl-Franzens-University of Graz, Austria (which offers eleven languages). Observations from both programs provide insight for interpreter educators as they strive to improve programs and enhance student retention and program completion rates.

Keywords: transferring language skills, interpreter education, interpreting student retention, interpreter education persistence, sign language interpreting, qualitative research

Introduction

Practitioners as well as interpreter trainers agree that a good active and passive command of the working languages is a prerequisite for interpreting (Gile
1995:213; Humphrey & Alcorn 2001:50; Kalina 1998:269; Seleskovitch & Lederer 1989). Still, there may be a chasm between this idealistic theoretical assumption of language competence and reality in Interpreter Education Programs (IEPs). Many interpreting instructors face similar problems of students who start their interpretation classes with an insufficient command of their working languages (including their mother tongue).

Bowen (1989) asserted that the student’s self-appraisal in many cases differs from the instructor’s assessment and that students may not recognize their language insufficiencies. Consequently, instructors may encounter language deficiencies that can not be resolved totally in the classroom. On the other hand, students may tend to blame the instructors for their failures or become anxious and demoralized with regard to persevering until program completion. Déjean le Féal described the situation in which many spoken language interpreting students find themselves when starting their first simultaneous interpretation (SI) class in the following:

[… ] SI seems daunting to most students and if their first attempt in the booth is unsuccessful, they’re often skittish and apprehensive about persevering […]. Therefore, in the initial SI training phase the primary objectives should be to ensure that students are spared a traumatic first experience in the booth […].

(Déjean le Féal 1997:616)

Interestingly, similar observations have been made in interpretation schools where students start to learn one or two languages from a beginner’s level upon entering the IEP. This would be the case especially if the student is beginning to study a language that is seldom taught in secondary or preparatory school programs. The challenge for educators becomes one of helping students avoid the traumatic response to first interpreting attempts described above and improving teaching methods that apply directly to the transition phase, that period during which students begin to apply language learning to interpretation.

The project presented in this article observed interpretation students in two unrelated language venues — one at the Institute of Theoretical and Applied Translation Studies at Karl-Franzens-University of Graz, Austria (ITAT), which offers training in the spoken modality, and the other at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, USA (UALR), which centers on the signed modality. The purpose of the study was to explore student perceptions of readiness for applying language skills to interpretation and to identify factors they thought might contribute to their mastering the task at hand. The first part of this article describes the curricular structure of the two participating IEPs, followed by the
Applying language skills

subject background found in the literature. After a brief overview of interpreter education and interpretation theory, the research method is described, followed by a detailed discussion of project results.

Program descriptions of ITAT and UALR interpreter education programs
Whereas some IEPs are post-graduate, ITAT students entered an undergraduate program where they began learning any of the offered languages except German, English and French, which could have been studied at school prior to attending University. The program at the time of the study was a 4-year program consisting of 2 phases. The students selected a B and a C language among the 11 languages offered. During the first phase, students attended language (enhancement), introductory translation, linguistics, and civilization and culture classes. After the initial phase, students were required to pass an exam comprising written and oral tests. During the second phase, students had to decide whether they wanted to specialize in translation or interpreting. Students studying interpretation could begin with simultaneous interpreting classes before liaison or consecutive training. The second phase of the curriculum included language enhancement, translation and interpretation classes. Under this curriculum design, student cohorts were very heterogeneous because there was no policy or procedure to determine readiness for beginning interpretation classes. At the end of the second phase students were administered a final exam and were required to write a master’s thesis. In Austria, the law does not allow entrance examinations for universities, so no such exams existed.1

UALR students, some with no previous second-language experience, entered a four-year undergraduate program leading to a Bachelor of Arts degree in Interpretation: American Sign Language (ASL)/English. Students who entered the program with language competency took an in-house placement examination consisting of written knowledge and skill components. The results of the examination were used to determine the need for additional language training and proper student placement in the ASL language sequence. Official program admission could be initiated after one year of language coursework or equivalent proficiency as determined on the placement exam. The program was designed to prepare interpreters to work in a variety of settings (i.e. schools, courts, hospitals, conferences) in a variety of modes (i.e. tactile, oral, restricted visual field).

The UALR program of study included second language learning, foundation courses in deafness, deaf culture and ethics, with an emphasis on theory in its early stage. After the first two years, students entered beginning to advanced
methods courses in interpretation and transliteration (signing in English word order). They participated in two field experiences: a practicum (90 clock hours), and a culminating 9-credit-hour (300 clock hours) internship. Upper-level courses also addressed the specialty areas of interpreting for persons who are deaf-blind and oral transliteration for persons who are deaf but do not sign. As with the ITAT students, UALR students did not take an entrance examination into their IEP or into the University. At the time of the study, neither of the programs offered separate courses for consecutive interpretation as a prerequisite for simultaneous interpretation; however, both recognized the natural sequence from consecutive to simultaneous work and incorporated this sequence into existing courses as units or modules.

Transition phase as discussed in the literature
Since the establishment of the first interpreter training programs, curricular issues and teaching methods have been a central topic in both signed and spoken language interpreting programs. Interpretation teachers who engage in research usually have a vital interest in training issues. Still, systematic and research-based reflection along these lines is fairly recent (cf. Pöchhacker 2004:177). Although there is substantial literature on interpretation teaching, the conclusions of research activities are often not implemented either in curriculum planning or in individual classes (Pöchhacker 1999). Thus, the dialectical connections between theory, empirical research, practice and teaching may still not be fully apparent to interpreter educators.

Interpretation teaching
The literature on interpreter training often focuses on preparatory exercises. Situated at the very beginning of interpreter training, these materials are highly relevant to the project at hand. Still, such literature covers only one aspect of learning, namely the teaching of skill components and introducing students to central elements of the interpreting process. These building blocks, including transfer exercises such as cloze tasks, sight translation/interpreting, dual tasking, simultaneous paraphrasing and shadowing for beginning interpretation, are delineated in the work of Kalina (1992, 1998:250–267). Kalina (1998:268–272) also touches more briefly upon preliminary and ancillary skills such as perception and production exercises.

Far less common in the available literature, however, are the comprehensive
didactic and methodological concepts underlying the systematic teaching of interpreting. It is only recently that interpreter educators have drawn more fully upon pedagogical theories and empirical research for the purpose of improving curriculum development and increasing the qualitative and quantitative accuracy of student performance (e.g. Roy 2000). This is not surprising when one remembers that systematic research on interpreting is relatively young. Among the approaches that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s were those of Lambert (1988) and Gile (1995, 1999), both from the paradigm that described and analyzed interpreting as a cognitive process. Lambert focused on the necessity of developing the component skills in an interpreter education program, and Gile has dealt with the difficulties of processing capacity management. Gile’s Effort Models in Interpretation was adapted for the training of sign language interpreters by Bélanger (1996) and may serve to inform programs in which students — whether they are studying spoken or signed language interpreting — may find the transition particularly difficult.

Although the literature on pedagogical issues is gaining ground, there are few empirical studies exploring the progression of student performance in class. Moser-Mercer (2000), for example, conducted a very instructive long-term study on the acquisition of expertise in simultaneous interpreting, which provided the following insight into a student’s difficulties navigating the stages of the learning process:

During the first few sessions of simultaneous interpreting and continuing over the course of the subsequent six months it appears that concentration, the ability to adequately juggle all the subskills of the task without detriment to any one of them, is the most crucial of all difficulties students are faced with. The fact that it co-varies with a number of other difficulties, such as comprehension, self-monitoring and finding the structure of a speech, indicates that indeed concentration or lack thereof, is the single most important determiner of success or failure in interpreting. (Moser-Mercer 2000:349)

Traditionally, research in signed and spoken language interpreting proceeded separately (Grbic 1994:51; Pöchhacker 1998:172–175). One of the reasons might be that sign language interpreting is not usually offered in the spoken language programs. Moreover, spoken language programs usually focus on conference interpreting, while sign language interpreter education programs lean more toward community, or liaison, interpreting. Whatever the reason for the minimal exchange of ideas and expertise between the spoken-language and signed-language communities, this study strives to strengthen the ties between the two areas of interpreter education.
In 1995, the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, Inc. (USA) translated and published a monograph by Seleskovitch and Lederer (1989) aimed at teachers of spoken language interpreting. Subsequent incorporation of this work in sign language interpreter education programs indicates another effort to merge modality-specific information. Specifically, in the revised second edition of the French version (Seleskovitch & Lederer 2002), a chapter on sign language interpreting was included, setting the stage for this project, which observes the shared problem of transferring language skills to interpretation in both modalities.

Language competence

We have seen through classroom observations that the transition from foreign language acquisition to interpreter training is marked by difficulties. Although adequate active and passive language command is agreed upon as fundamental for starting interpreting classes, in reality, interpreter educators may not find such ideal conditions. Students’ problems with manipulating languages may become evident during the introduction of preparatory exercises (pre-interpretating skills). Therefore, it is surprising that remedial activities developed to meet the student’s inadequate language competence are often seen as lying beyond the realm of the interpretation classroom. Rather, remediation is assumed to belong in the area of foreign language pedagogy, the only exception being the systematic language enhancement that occurs naturally alongside interpretation teaching, e.g. through the selection of texts on the basis of their lexical and syntactic complexity (Kalina 1998:269). As Gile (1995:210–211) notes, “major interpretation schools in the West […] refuse to be regarded as language schools […]. The situation in the field is therefore clearly quite different from what it would be if theoretical linguistic prerequisites were met.”

One of the few elaborate and systematic suggestions for addressing the problem of language readiness can be found in Gile (1995:209–238), who presented a Gravitational Model of linguistic availability for use in the classroom. Another very interesting approach to enhancing language competence within interpreter training from a culturally sensitive, discourse-analytical point of view is presented by Setton (1994). By analyzing problems that occur in teaching interpreting between Chinese and English (languages and cultures with very different systems and traditions) in Taiwan, Setton stresses the impact of languages and cultures on the learning process. This is of particular interest for interpreter educators (Davidson 2000).

A broader concept of language learning and translator education based on
a social constructivist epistemology was presented by Kiraly (2000), who moved from the rather cognitive approach to one that was based on an “intricate interplay of physical, emotional, social and cognitive factors” (p. 183) through collaborative interaction. Likewise, the traditional Master/Learner model that reflects the teacher as “the possessor and distributor of knowledge — in fact, of truth” (p. 15) and the learner as the absorber has evolved into an alternative constructivist model. This model builds around the idea that for each individual learner “learning is a personal, holistic, intrinsically motivating and socially effectuated construction process” (Kiraly 2000:23) where the teacher has the role of a guide and catalyst. Huba and Freed (2000) emphasized that this learner-centered environment allows students to “explore research, make choices and explain, and this helps them develop an understanding that matches that of experts in the field” (p. 36). One main goal of this model is for the teaching environment to become learner-centered via the development of a positive self for students as they progress. It is a model that is applied widely in foreign language teaching and also may be applied to interpreter training, as suggested by the results of this study. In the case of translator and interpreter training, this means a shift from teaching specific skills that focus on the end product (the translated piece or interpreted message) to using a more holistic method to teach skills, knowledge and strategies that lead to translator/interpreter competence (Kiraly 2000:13). As interpreter education breaks away from the traditional learning paradigm, it comes to include psychological and sociological factors in the learning process, and takes an active interest in students’ impressions as they enter the transition phase. The question for interpreter educators remains: What can be done to address the initial problems and pitfalls that students face in the early stages of their training?

The study: Theory to practice

The underpinnings of interpretation process theory and pedagogical methods of the two interpreter education programs in this study are compatible. While each may have different entrance requirements (i.e. cumulative grade point average, assessed language competency) and potential variances in the length of time students may require for completing the program, they are similar in methodology and projected competency outcomes. Both programs aspire to graduate students who have the potential to pass professional competency-based licensure and/or certification evaluations that will qualify them to work along
the continuum of interpreting scenarios, including conference interpreting.

Students in interpreter education programs encounter such issues as functional faculty-student relationships and perceived high expectations to master the languages and the interpreting process within the time constraints of their programs. They also might be given to self-doubt — questioning their personal and academic qualifications and wondering if they are adequately prepared to succeed. Although the literature addresses many of these issues within the context of second language acquisition (Ellis 1999; Kasper 2001; Lantolf 2000; Lightbown 2000; Norton 2000; Onwuegbuzie et al. 2000), little is known about difficulties students face as they begin training in interpreting.

**Qualitative research approach**

The researchers used a qualitative research design with a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss 1967: 105–113) to “generate analytical categories and dimensions” which may explain interpretation readiness (Spencer et al. 2003: 201). The learning environments at ITAT and UALR were selected to allow for a deeper understanding of the progression students make from language acquisition into the professional arena of language interpretation. This research addressed student anxiety levels at a critical juncture of language learning and initial interpretation study, one which sometimes caused students to feel incapacitated and to withdraw from the program.

The choice of using a quantitative or qualitative research design is not simply a matter of choosing the most appropriate protocol to test hypotheses or explore research questions. On the surface, it is apparent that these two modes of inquiry are separated by differing collection and analysis techniques, sample characteristics and report presentation (Snape & Spencer 2003: 3). More importantly, however, these modes are segregated by philosophical perspectives that are diverse and complex. Quantitative research relies on a hypothetico-deductive model in which a researcher proposes hypotheses based on *a priori* evidence and then tests those hypotheses with data collected from a randomly selected sample (Ary et al. 2002: 422). The goals of this process are to confirm hypotheses based on an observable phenomenon and make inferences from the sample to a larger, target population. This link between hypothesis confirmation and inferential statistics is grounded in the philosophical disposition of a static, external reality that is testable with reliability and validity (Merriam 2002a: 1).

Qualitative research, on the other hand, is an inductive process encouraging the use of exploration and investigation to generate hypotheses and theoretical
constructs (Ary et al. 2002:425–426). Researchers with an interest in qualitative knowledge construction do not work from a position of a priori evidence; instead, they search for data collection and analysis techniques that support and nurture an ‘eyes wide-open’ approach to exploration. Philosophically, researchers with a qualitative perspective encourage a world view of a socially constructed reality informed by human interaction (Denzin & Lincoln 2000:3). Reality is not a single, external event that can be tested or confirmed. Rather, it is a human process of constructing knowledge, defining life constructs and integrating diverse experiences that require in-depth exploration of individual realities, with each reality adding a formative piece to a more global phenomenon (Glesne 1999:5).

The intent of the qualitative study, therefore, is to use the individual voice to explain an unobservable phenomenon. To accomplish this intent, qualitative researchers use data collection techniques that allow for a purposive search. Whereas quantitative researchers are interested in collecting data from a random sample to ensure generalizability, qualitative researchers purposively select their sample to ensure a valid collection of data linked to the intent of the study and the research questions (Ritchie et al. 2003:78). The qualitative researcher identifies sampling criteria that cement the link between sample and phenomenon and then recruits representatives of that phenomenon to participate in the study.

Just as there are numerous random sampling techniques available for the quantitative researcher (Borg & Gall 1989:220–227), the qualitative researcher has a host of purposive sampling techniques to employ to ensure the most appropriate sample to understand the phenomenon. These techniques range from ‘homogeneous samples’ in which all of the participants share a common characteristic to allow for in-depth exploration of the phenomenon, to ‘extreme case sampling’ in which sample participants are chosen because of extreme or unique lived experiences to understand the diversity within the phenomenon (Ritchie et al. 2003:79). One popular technique is the stratified purposive sample used to explore a phenomenon by comparing the experiences of subgroups. With a stratified sample, the qualitative researcher recruits volunteers to participate in two or more interview groups. The groups are identified based on important ‘between-group’ differences. However, participants in each subgroup are selected to ensure homogeneity ‘within-group’, by sharing a common trait that is important to the study (Ritchie et al. 2003:79).

Within qualitative research there are a variety of exploration traditions (Creswell 1998). Each of these informs the researcher’s use of data collection,
analysis and reporting techniques, and each proposes a slightly different perspective on reality. For example, within the qualitative philosophy of critical theory, researchers search for the connection between reality and the political characteristics of a situation (Merriam 2002a:4). The poststructural researcher questions the structure of reality and searches for an understanding of “what it is and what it is not” (Merriam 2002a:4). The grounded theory approach is another philosophical perspective or tradition in qualitative research (Glaser & Strauss 1967). It makes no assumptions or suppositions about the phenomenon a priori. Grounded theorists develop research questions based on personal experiences with a phenomenon and design a research study to fully explore that phenomenon. “The intent of a grounded theory study is to generate or discover a theory, an abstract analytical schema of a phenomenon, that relates to a particular situation” (Creswell 1998:56). Once data are collected, the grounded theorist typically uses some variation of the constant comparison approach to analyze data and design a theoretical framework explaining the phenomenon a posteriori (Strauss & Corbin 1990).

Sample

The researchers used stratified purposive sampling at both institutions, based on sampling criteria to select student volunteers who were not considered to be bilingual as children, and were either upper-level interpretation students or recent graduates of an IEP. The sample sets — one at UALR and another at ITAT — allowed for moderate variation around the phenomenon of interpretation readiness with the purpose of enhancing in-depth exploration (Merriam 2002a:12; Ritchie et al. 2003:78–80). This moderate variation component also provided enough homogeneity among participants to allow sub-sample comparisons.

In February 2002, the researchers at the UALR program recruited five student volunteers, one male and four female, one African-American and four Anglo-American. All were under age 40 and exhibited a range of functional sign language skills. One of the participants was a recent graduate of the IEP. In April 2002, researchers at the ITAT program also recruited five student volunteers, four females and one male, all under age 40, representing a range of ethnic populations that included Croatian, Austrian, German and Slovene and demonstrating language competency in Spanish, German, English, Russian, Slovenian, Italian, Bosnian/Serbian/Croatian and French. Most of the ITAT students had entered the university interpretation program with pre-existing
Applying language skills

skills in two working languages (A and B), and all took classes (some at begin-
ner level) in a third language (C) following admission to the IEP. The UALR
students, for the most part, began their language instruction when they entered
the university, and upon satisfactorily attaining the competencies set forth in
the language courses, were permitted to proceed to interpreting courses. The
primary commonality among the students in the sample was the interest in
contributing personal perspectives to the research topic so as to help improve
the program in the area of transition.

To recruit student participants at ITAT, the faculty of the upper-level
interpretation classes informed their students about the research project. Those
who indicated an interest received an e-mail message asking them to contact the
researcher so that a focus group session could be arranged. At UALR, the
researchers presented an overview of the study in upper-level courses, distribut-
ed letters and posted requests for student participation. The students were asked
to contact the researcher via e-mail to express interest. Students then received
confirmation, and upon arriving at the focus group sessions were presented
with a consent form, which provided them with the option of reviewing the
results of the study.

Focus group method

Data were collected in two focus group sessions moderated by the lead research-
er. The first was held at UALR in March 2002 with students from the Interpre-
tation: ASL/English program. The second was held in May 2002 at ITAT. Both
sessions were audiotaped to facilitate data analysis (Finch & Lewis
2003:176–180). The Institutional Review Board at UALR approved the entire
research protocol in March 2002 prior to any data collection. With the consent
form signed, students completed a preliminary self-report questionnaire to rate
personal comfort in various inter-relational settings and provide personal
background information. Demographic questions addressed student age; A, B,
and C languages; and years of study prior to admittance into the interpreter
education program. Respondents were asked to rank a number of statements
about personality and readiness characteristics in the order to which they felt
they applied to them. Once the preliminary questionnaire was completed, the
moderator for the focus group session engaged the participants in conversations
relating to the following main questions:

1. What personal and academic strengths do you think a language student
should have to successfully complete the interpreting part of the IEP?
2. How do you know when you are ready to make the transition from learning language to interpreting?
3. What concerns or anxieties do you have (or did you have) about making the transition from language learning to interpreter training?
4. If you do feel ready to begin interpreting, what do you think contributed most to your confidence, and if you don’t feel ready to begin interpreting, what skills do you think you are lacking? (This question was asked after the students mentioned confidence as critical to performance.)

The researchers developed the main interview questions based on a review of extant literature (Brott & Myers 2002:147). All questions were presented in English, as this was the language common to all participants. Following each main question, the moderator used probes to encourage participation and reflection (Finch & Lewis 2003:181) and to focus student responses on the research questions (see Table 1). The focus group sessions lasted approximately 2 hours and concluded with a final question allowing students to synthesize and complete their thoughts (Finch & Lewis 2003:179).

Data analysis

A transcriber produced verbatim transcripts of the focus group sessions. The intent of this study was to fully explore the phenomenon of interpretation readiness by comparing the two learning environments, thus the data from the UALR sessions and the ITAT sessions were analyzed separately. Using the constant comparison analysis technique (Strauss & Corbin 1990), researchers coded the transcripts from the focus group sessions using the intent of the study as the coding guide. With the data fully coded, the researchers combined the codes into categories, and eventually merged these into research themes, which were combined to form the overarching patterns of attitudes, thus providing the structure for the final theoretical framework for explaining the phenomenon of interpretation readiness (Bernard 2000:443–456).

For example, one such code that emerged from the transcript was labeled Background Information. This code explained participants’ attitudes toward all of the information they felt they needed to interpret a message. It was merged into a category labeled Knowledge Base that explained specific topics that students thought were crucial to reducing the effort involved in message interpretation. Specifically, students recognized that being well read and aware of world events was critical to their personal knowledge bases. This coding
category was combined with others into the theme of Literacy and eventually became the Academic Skills pattern. This pattern in turn became a construct in the theoretical framework that included the critical thinking and cognitive functioning component of the study phenomenon (see Figure 1).

To ensure internal validity of the resulting theoretical framework, the researchers engaged in a process of peer examination of the emerging findings (Merriam 2002b:26). The peer examiner was an experienced interpreter and interpreter educator who had no connection to the study and did not stand to benefit from its results. The peer examiner reviewed the transcripts, codes, themes and resulting theoretical framework to ensure that the framework consistently represented the voices heard in the research conversations.

The researchers used member checks to further enhance internal validity (Merriam 2002b:26). During the initial data collection phase, they asked
volunteers from each group to review the final research report in order to ensure that the analytical categories and dimensions identified by the researchers truly reflected the reality of the contributors. Approximately one year after data were collected, the final research report was sent to all member-check volunteers, and they were asked to submit their critiques within two weeks. Three members responded and reported that the report accurately reflected what they had said. The member check verified the internal validity of the resulting theoretical constructs. Finally, external validity of the theoretical framework was enhanced through multi-site design and by providing thick, rich descriptions in this article (Merriam 2002b:29).

**Results**

Following a preliminary discussion about confidentiality, students were eager to share their thoughts openly about personal experiences in advancing from language learning into the interpretation component of their university programs. Responses to the main and probing questions led to the emergence of six distinct constructs to explain the phenomenon of interpretation readiness (see Figure 2). Those constructs were defined as:

*Personality characteristics:* Personality identifiers of students who experience the
Applying language skills

least amount of stress during their transition period

Academic skills: Academic skills that allow students to function at higher competency levels in interpretation classes

Professional expectations: Professional and classroom expectations of the faculty

Support systems: Support systems necessary to sustain a student through the difficult adjustment

Faculty relationships: Faculty-to-student relationships and how they affect students' ability to internalize feedback and self-monitor for improvement

Program/Curriculum: Curriculum strengths and weaknesses and program sequence affecting students' rating of language competency and personal experience

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Figure 2. Constructs for successful transitions

Construct 1: Personality characteristics

Students identified specific personality characteristics that they believed were fundamental to persistence in interpreter education programs, especially as they moved from language learning to interpretation learning. They identified confidence as the primary personality characteristic for dealing with the stress of a highly rigorous interpreting program. As students discussed their own feelings of confidence, an interesting contrast emerged between the two groups. ITAT students placed a stronger emphasis on personal responsibility for learning, and one stated “You strengthen your self-confidence when you see how much you have improved.”
Related to the need for self-assurance, the students noted that the stringency of interpretation study is more difficult for students who were unable to cope with instructor feedback and were not sufficiently resilient in the face of criticism. Additionally, students said they must be self-motivated, self-reliant, independent and tenacious in their efforts to achieve their goals. One student humorously added that interpretation students must be fearless, emphasizing that courage was needed to take risks and tread new ground. Other personal characteristics that were identified as critical for a smooth transition were determination, ambition and goal-orientation. In other words, the students recognized that interpreter education could be a lonely process requiring intrinsic motivation to move forward in the face of fear.

**Construct 2: Academic skills**

When asked about the academic skills that they needed for a smooth transfer of language skills to interpretation, some participants regarded literacy about many subjects and the ability to think critically as significant to their success. Furthermore, the students identified flexibility, open-mindedness, and the ability to generalize feedback from one language to another as beneficial to their transition into interpretation learning. They recognized that taking the initiative to identify resources, such as equally motivated peers and library materials, when they needed additional assistance with class projects was necessary to produce the accurate interpretations they desired. Specifically, one student commented that working in isolation within the program did not prepare them as future interpreters to “face big problems in real life when they have to work in groups.” Another student expressed frustration about not being informed of potentially helpful resources by saying, “I don’t know why this information [about these materials] does not circulate.”

**Construct 3: Professional expectations**

According to the group discussion about program requirements, some expectations of the faculty were more reasonable than others. Students generally considered it to be a reasonable expectation that those working with a B or C language independently would involve themselves in their respective language communities. However, some students who were questioning the adequacy of their language base admitted they found little time to engage themselves within the second (or third) language community. In the category of unreasonable,
Applying language skills

students complained about the bulk of reading (“I don’t have time to read the literature or even a newspaper”) and the independent study that was expected of them beyond the ordinary curriculum (“They expect you to know things, and I just wonder, where am I supposed to learn those things?”). At this point during the focus groups, students expressed the stress they felt when trying to keep up with the rigors of interpreter education programs, sometimes feeling that expectations were too high and all-consuming.

The seriousness of their endeavor was weighing heavily on the students’ minds during the focus group sessions. They acknowledged that taking responsibility and demonstrating high levels of sociolinguistic competency were vital to their continuing in the program and successfully completing it (“We need to take new responsibilities because other people depend on [interpreters]”). For students who were experiencing deficiencies in their language base, the expectations of faculty seemed to be more unreasonable than for those who had entered the program with a strong language base and who were able to implement a more independent, self-initiated course of study. The notions of low self-confidence, language inadequacy and unreasonable faculty expectations led some students to express intense frustration with their attempts to persevere until program completion. On the other hand, one ITAT student verbalized an understanding of the IEPs objectives in the following comment:

“I think there is not one student leaving this university who can say he or she knows everything. They [The faculty] want to show us how research [thorough background study] works, how we can look things up, and how to prepare ourselves for the actual work. We are not living dictionaries afterwards [when we complete the program]. I think they succeed in this [teaching us]. They give us the basics and then it depends on us what we make of it afterwards. That’s why you have to be self-confident so you can use your basics given by the university.”

Construct 4: Support systems

Many of the students noted that an outside support system allowed them to keep their eyes on their goals and strive for program completion when they were feeling overwhelmed by program demands. For some, family members provided the support they needed. One student’s family, an ethnic minority, had never had a member graduate from a university, and this motivated the student to persist. Another student drew support from peers and proceeded to organize study sessions during which they could bolster each other’s efforts. Although the students mentioned that their friends had provided them with
support, they also pointed out that friends, who were not enrolled in the IEP as well, were not as helpful because “they just don’t know what we go through.”

Students also received encouragement for their efforts when consumers of interpreting services complimented them during classroom or mentored community (liaison) interpreting experiences. This type of support was especially meaningful to students who grasped the impact that accurate message interpretation could have on the lives of those for whom they would work. Since, ultimately, this consumer feedback would sustain them as professional interpreters, the students valued it even more than faculty, family or peer support.

**Construct 5: Faculty relationships**

Receiving support from *within* the IEP was identified as important, and establishing mutually positive working relationships with faculty was one of the six patterns that evolved from the student discussions. The focal point for these discussions was the manner in which faculty provided feedback to students. Students in both programs felt that feedback (also called “criticism” by some) was, at times, discriminatory and attended to personal incompatibilities rather than to the product of interpretation. Students noted that non-objective feedback that does not provide strategies for improvement is not helpful and served merely to discourage them. Students preferred those faculty members who provided balanced feedback that specifically addressed errors as well as accuracies and who gave special attention to tone of voice and clear, succinct phrasing. Students from each group expressed a need to communicate with faculty openly, even when it involved disagreement. One student dejectedly summarized personal experience by saying “… when you start to argue, you [the student] are always the loser.”

**Construct 6: Program/Curriculum**

Throughout both focus group discussions, students were quick to identify areas within the programs that might be improved, whether in the curriculum or in the structure of the programs. For example, they recommended adding a transition course that would bridge language study to interpretation. They hypothesized that an optional reinforcement language course could assist students who did not perceive themselves as ready to proceed to the next step of the learning sequence. Some students admitted struggling through second language acquisition and asked for faculty to consider slowing down the pace of
Applying language skills, possibly providing an additional language course for extended study and reinforcement. Conversely, those students who progressed easily through language acquisition did not request additional language courses; rather, they preferred to see more direct and rapid-paced instruction for the advanced students so that they did not lose interest or waste time in class. For the most part, students agreed that more hands-on experience, mentor relationships with experienced interpreters or advanced students, extended role-play in the classroom, and early exposure to the interpreting process would be valuable.

Discussion

The participants in the study represented various phases of transition along the continuum and included lower-level students, upper-level students and one recent graduate. While the heterogeneity of the sample may be viewed as limiting the applicability of findings, it is more likely that the diversity of a purposive sample enriched the results and gave the reader a better understanding of student experiences along the continuum. The findings of this study could be enhanced in subsequent research that is designed more narrowly to investigate one phase of learning. In that event, a more homogeneous student group may be warranted (i.e. lower-level students, upper-level students or recent graduates).

Question #3 regarding anxieties and concerns about the transition phase may limit the study because it appears to lead students to assume such anxieties and concerns are inherent to transition. More appropriate and neutral wording for the question might be, “What feelings did you have about making the transition from language learning to interpreter training?” Question #4 asks “What contributed most to your confidence?” and suggests confidence as a key construct within the question; however, it did not present a limitation in this study because both student groups had identified and discussed confidence prior to this question.

The six constructs that evolved from student discussions reflect a theoretical framework heavily based on student attitude toward learning a skill that has been deemed quite laborious (Gile 1995:159–190). Students who said, “I watch my friends [in other programs], and I have to say…I work much harder,” or “I would say interpreting into another language is quite difficult,” paralleled the sentiments of practitioner and conference interpreting researcher Daniel Gile when he said that “one of the most striking and challenging phenomena in
interpreting is its fundamental difficulty for the interpreter” (1995:159). Students may begin to experience this difficulty of processing two languages when they take their initial course in interpretation. They promptly recognize that utilizing the *bilingual switch mechanism* for the purpose of simultaneous interpretation is complex beyond mere bilingualism (Coughlin 1985). Although they may have been exposed to interpretation theory during language learning, the actual task of interpreting may seem too complex and insurmountable in the early stages of learning. The student responses presented here are very similar to previous suggestions about second language mastery and interpretation as discrete areas of skill (Davidson 2000; Peterson 2000; Seleskovitch & Lederer 2002).

The patterns that emerged in this study, although isolated here for the purpose of evaluation, in reality overlap. To avoid oversimplifying the difficult process of interpretation learning, the reader is encouraged to keep in mind that student perspectives would actually not be so conveniently compartmentalized. This overlapping of constructs becomes evident in the discussion of confidence and faculty relationships. Outside support systems also promote confidence and perseverance. Likewise, inherent personality characteristics of successful interpreting students merge with their drive to learn continually and to excel in other academic areas. As one student phrased it quite aptly “you have to have multiple strengths.”

**Confidence and risk-taking as primary personality assets**

The identification of confidence as a primary personality asset for interpreting students affirmed that students going into a program with a high degree of confidence are at a greater advantage than those who perceive themselves to be less competent (MacIntyre et al. 1997). The latter may be at risk of developing the problem described by Horwitz (1988) in relation to language learners whose low levels of functioning reflected their belief that they could not use their acquired second language effectively. The participants in this study described confidence, in reference to students transferring language skills to interpretation, as an assurance that the linguistic product of one’s interpretation is distinct from personal ego (educators may call this a detachment of one’s *person* from one’s *performance*). This confidence, which was strengthened through self-monitoring, ultimately allowed students to exhibit a willingness to try new and more difficult material for the sake of improvement (“You really have to go above and beyond [the course requirements] in order to succeed. You have to
be very ambitious."). Risk-taking is known to be essential for language learning (Beebe 1983; Ely 1986; MacIntyre et al. 1997), and comments such as “You just have to jump in and do it” and “It’s just a matter of trying it” exemplify absolute awareness of the uncertainties that lie ahead in interpretation study.

The students linked confidence to an attitude of assertion and implied that if a person is unreserved and enjoys the challenges of meeting new people while experiencing new situations, he or she is more likely to exhibit the essential fortitude for entering interpretation coursework. This insight is reflective of prior observations that “breadth of interest” and “personal scope” are favorable attributes of an interpreter (Rudser & Strong 1986). Additionally, ITAT students viewed confidence as something pre-existent in the student upon entering the program, while UALR students expected confidence to be taught and instilled in them during their coursework. While some researchers have attempted to identify personality characteristics inherent to signed language and spoken language interpreters (Longley 1989; Schein 1974), there are as yet no consistent and empirically evaluated testing methods for screening personal qualities during entrance examinations (Frishberg 1990:35–36; Moser-Mercer 1994).

**Faculty role and support relationships**

Ficchi (1999:212) has suggested that professors play a critical role in motivating and assisting students as they learn to interpret. Teaching students to participate confidently in the classroom, to manage their anxiety and to take risks emerges as especially crucial during the transition period that was the focus of this study. When asked to identify what it takes to bridge the gap between second language acquisition and interpreting, students concluded that by this time in their learning process, assurance of one’s linguistic adequacy must be firmly established. It is important to note that students did not mention “mastery” or “bilingualism,” which are common terms used to represent a sufficient knowledge of the two working languages to produce a message equivalent. Rather, they emphasized “adequacy,” which appears to be much more realistic for them.

Inasmuch as educators may be instrumental in teaching or promoting self-confidence during the course of language learning (Oxford 1982), peer relationships have also been shown to promote advanced communication skills and second language proficiency (Kasper 2001:517). The students in this study identified positive faculty relationships and peer support as contributing to their personal evaluation of language adequacy. This leads us to a realization that an effort on the part of the faculty to bolster student confidence must begin...
as early as possible and must not be deferred until the critical transition period. If faculty members are perceived as “superiors” and students as “subordinates,” potentially destructive power roles are liable to become entrenched, especially when complicated by cultural variance between faculty and students. This in turn may affect a student’s ability to gather information or seek constructive feedback (Baldwin & Hunt 2002:275–278).

Knowing that students must work comfortably between cultures, faculty should be particularly sensitive to the fact that students — some more than others — are adversely affected by the role distinctions. Communicating with students in a style that is confrontational, demeaning, intimidating or face-challenging (Baldwin & Hunt 2002:277) is liable to undermine whatever self-confidence the student possessed upon entering the course. One student targeted this problem as central to faculty-student interaction by saying, “I tell you…confidence is a BIG issue. It makes all the difference in the world with my interpretation.” Hence, by placing a high priority upon an approach to evaluation that is perceived as supportive, unbiased and based on objective criteria, faculty can contribute to confidence so that it is at its peak during the transition period. An interesting example of an applied egalitarian approach can be found in the constructive criticism model of Schweda Nicholson (1993).

Programs, curricula and high expectations

It is evident from the students’ evaluations that “enjoying learning new information” and being “prepared to learn new things all the time” are tantamount to an ability to focus on the interpreting task instead of being preoccupied with understanding what the message is about. By identifying this academic characteristic, students confirmed that those who are not equipped with sufficient knowledge bases waste time in the “listening and analysis effort” (Gile 1995:162) that should be spent on actual interpretation practice. The assertion of an ITAT student who said “general knowledge is very important for an interpreter” resonates the stance of Hirsch, Kett and Trefil (2002), who advocated cultural literacy as a component of an educated society, and of Coughlin (1985), who postulated that interpreters with more information available to them have the ability to process languages more rapidly. The problem appears to be that students who enter a program with a joy of learning may eventually become discouraged by the constant requirement to study, stay current and improve vocabulary. The students vacillated between finding pleasure in studying diverse topics, and fatigue and frustration with their own inabilitys to
Applying language skills

keep up with the extracurricular study expected of them. Specifically, the ITAT students mentioned their obligation to be aware of their ever-changing environment and to stay up-to-date with political and social issues such as the enlargement of the European Union.

*Group parallels*

When attempting to identify parallels between the student groups at ITAT and UALR, several similarities became evident; so much so that the groups sometimes appeared interchangeable, even though they were studying different languages and represented multiple cultures. Students from both groups verbalized how their confidence could be affected, either positively or negatively, by faculty attitude. Regarding faculty influence, students expressed:

*ITAT student:* “When [the instructor] gives you good and reasonable advice, you can really think about it and say ‘OK, this helps me.’”

*ITAT student:* “[Some faculty] insist on their ideas being right, and this is not helpful in strengthening your self-confidence.”

*UALR student:* “They [faculty] boost me up and [I say] ‘you can do it!’”

*UALR student:* “Getting a direct answer [to a question]…gives me an idea of what I can do better.”

*UALR student:* “It’s [one instructor’s] opinion…that does not mean the whole profession thinks that.”

Some members of both groups began to doubt their language competency immediately upon entering their first interpreting courses and expressed a desire for extended language learning before actual interpreting instruction. Regardless of individual language competency, they all recognized the value of learning about the interpreting process as early in their programs as feasible. Perhaps this realization was their way of suggesting that had they known what awaited them, they might have selected a different profession long before their transition!

Another similarity between the groups revolved around their discussions about relationships with faculty (or lack thereof). These discussions were a bit hesitant at times, sometimes prefaced with “Well, not to mention any names, but…” Some students in each group expressed a perception of professor favoritism and not-so-discreet preference of other students over themselves. These sentiments were articulated in the following statements: “The [students] who are not preferred have to work much harder to achieve,” and “It’s not a problem for me if some students are preferred…just don’t be against me.” At
this point in the discussions, supportive peers nodded in agreement and offered statements such as “I don’t let it discourage me.” Beyond relational issues, comments from each of the student groups such as, “I have the feeling that I have to fulfill some subjective quality criteria,” and “It’s really hard because this particular degree program is so subjective” speak to the need for faculty to assess and revise evaluation techniques. While subjective evaluation is elemental to a skills-based interpreter education program, the students highlighted the importance of developing methodologies that are as criterion-based as possible.

**Group differences**

While the groups exhibited many similarities, they also differed in a few respects. For example, ITAT students felt strongly that students should take time off from school and live with native speakers of their B and C languages before entering an interpreting program (“I think it would be better first to learn the language [in that country] for one or two years, and then come to the university”). They suggested that this would alleviate the language deficiencies that some students exhibit. Their expression about language immersion is strongly echoed in second language acquisition literature as one valuable option to achieving functional use of the language (Davidson 2000; Ellis 1999:35). Living in the midst of an acquired language and the people who use it is a logical method for spoken language interpreters to obtain language competency, but somewhat less plausible for students of signed languages.

A major problem in sign language teaching is that “ethnolinguistic vitality” (Clément et al. 1980:301) is lacking in the form of a Deaf country where students can go to spend a certain amount of time for language enhancement. Rather, immersion in language for these students requires a concerted effort to spend maximum waking hours in the presence of native sign language users in diverse locations (which most likely is encouraged by their faculty). Since self-confidence in second language acquisition has been directly linked to the assimilation of the student into the second language and culture (Clément et al. 1980), comfort deficiencies of sign language students must be addressed through increased personal contact with the Deaf community. This relationship to the Deaf community may be enigmatic for students as well as experienced interpreters who do not understand how language, culture and power are interrelated (Kannapell 1989; Stewart et al. 1998). Reluctance for some members of the American Deaf community to relinquish power over American Sign Language and use the language freely in the presence of aspiring interpreters
may relate to the sense of group identity and value that is attached to the language. There may be a concern that the language will not be respected by someone outside of the Deaf community (Kannapell 1989). Mindess (1999) describes the difficulty that an interpreter might experience when attempting immersion in the Deaf community, in the following:

On the one hand, they are appreciated for being able to sign and making accessible many areas of life which were hitherto impenetrable for many Deaf people. On the other hand, as hearing Americans, interpreters often do not follow the cultural conventions of Deaf culture. (p. 86)

Although the ITAT students readily acknowledged the need for language immersion, it seemed that the UALR students tended to expect sufficient language learning to occur during classroom time. Several times they faulted the faculty or program for not providing adequate language instruction. Examples of student attitudes were reflected in such statements as “It has been less than two years since I learned my first sign,” “[The faculty] think that just because you have finished the language sequence, you should know everything,” and “[Our university] has other developmental courses, why not developmental sign language courses?” These perceptions might explain why students felt they had been rushed into interpreting before they were ready. They simply lacked a feeling of ease with their second language because they had not had the prolonged experience in authentic settings that is recognized as imperative in the sociocultural theory of second language acquisition (Kasper 2001).

Unique to their situation at UALR, the students revealed frustration with the co-educational format of teaching second language students (those taking American Sign Language for second language credit but who did not want to be interpreters) alongside interpreting students in the primary language courses. Another difference between the ITAT and UALR students has to do with differences in the exposure to translation and interpretation theory. ITAT students receive a somewhat more extensive theoretical base in the form of lectures and seminars, which was reflected in their assertion that “good teaching promotes self-monitoring.” The skill of self-monitoring as a component of the theoretical knowledge base for interpreters is a fairly new concept for UALR students. Only recent curriculum revisions at UALR affirmed the links between self-regulation and academic performance (Archer et al. 1999; Corno 1986) and incorporated self-regulation theory (Oldfield et al. 1995) into upper-level interpreting courses.

Although some students in both groups expressed reluctance to disagree
with their professors, ITAT students stated this more emphatically than UALR students. The ITAT students suggested that cultural backgrounds and social norms for interaction in their respective cultures had most definitely influenced their ability to confront a professor. They verbalized their desire to disagree freely with faculty and to discuss their views openly without fear of repercussions when it came to evaluating their performance. Their ultimate desire was to establish positive working relationships with faculty.

Conclusion

The information that these student groups provided for faculty in IEPs has the potential to direct system changes aimed at improving student morale and outcomes. These changes might be manifested in the form of curriculum revision (addition, deletion or revision of existing coursework), structured student support networks (i.e. mentorship relationships with advanced students) and modifications in faculty approach to students. Based on what the students reported, faculty might want to discuss questions such as the following:

1. How can we promote confidence while instilling in students the need to take personal responsibility for their progress?
2. What teaching strategies might we utilize to improve understanding of the interpreting process prior to transition?
3. Can we improve our evaluation techniques so that they are more objective and beneficial for students?

Building on student experience and involving students in establishing criteria for a successful program are important in multiple domains within higher education (Klenowski 1995; Sivan 2000:206). The researchers in this study attempted to provide students with an open and confidential forum in which to discuss their views about themselves and their university programs. The students are commended for seriously and eloquently stating their opinions for the benefit of university programs and future students. The honesty with which all of the students responded to questions reflects their eagerness to air personal and program-related frustrations about their struggles as they began interpreting. They demonstrated a commitment to improving programs, their own experiences and the experiences of the students who will follow them.

The study showed, moreover, that interpreter education programs — despite the efforts of individual teachers — often do not take into account
crucial aspects of the learning process such as personal and social components. There is a call for reorientation of the education methodology toward a more holistic, communicative and collaborative learner-centered pedagogy, with teachers as guides for student interpreters on their way from novice to expert. Kiraly provides additional motivation for the interpretation faculty by saying:

We become empowered as teachers not by controlling learners, but by emancipating them. When we encourage learners to think for themselves and to depend on each other, on their individual capabilities for independent learning, and on us as guides and assistants to help them learn, we are empowering them to become full-fledged members of the communities in which they live and will work: we are helping them to build character and trustworthiness; we are promoting a culture of expertise and professionalism in our future colleagues and successors. This is empowerment for all of us: teachers, students and administrators alike. (Kiraly 2000:194)

One student, especially reluctant to let the focus group session end, requested the opportunity to explain the reason for wanting to become an interpreter. In this student’s view, interpreters promote peace between people. “I think disputes arise because of misunderstanding or not understanding other people and other cultures.” The value that this student attaches to interpreters as communication facilitators will, no doubt, be a personal source of sustenance through the interpretation program and serve as a guide toward the culture of expertise that we know is critical for interpreters. Interpreter educators, program directors, language teachers and curriculum designers would do well to give credence to the thoughts expressed herein by these groups of students and implement any changes that might ease their students’ transitions from language learning to interpretation practice.

Note

1. In 2002/2003, ITAT implemented a 5-year curriculum with a one-year transition phase (Year 3) between language learning and translation or interpretation classes. Austrian Sign Language was introduced for regular study, and classes for A language enhancement were added in Year 1. Years 4 and 5 were organized on a modular basis in which students may choose different modules of interest (i.e. conference interpreting, community and court interpreting, liaison interpreting, interpreting for the media).
References


Applying language skills


Applying language skills


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