



The role of research in interpreter education

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Summary: This paper discusses the role of research in interpreter education from a curricular and methodological point of view, suggesting some types of research that can benefit instructional practices, and considering who might be conducting such research, on what sort of topics, and how. With reference to a number of recent examples, the methodological challenges involved in tackling major curricular or didactic questions on the basis of controlled experimental designs are highlighted, and fieldwork in the classroom setting, often on the basis of case studies drawing on a range of predominantly qualitative data, is presented as a viable alternative that seems well suited to participatory research done in collaboration between teachers and students.

Keywords: teaching practices, assessment, classroom setting, research design, qualitative research, action research

1. Introduction

Many interpreters who are well established in the profession today most likely acquired their skills and earned their academic credentials at a time when the relationship posited in my title would have been considered controversial, to say the least. As demonstrated by the successful performance of many accomplished professionals, interpreting skills can be acquired in formal instruction without any reference to research. I myself can attest to that from my experience as a student in the Department of Translator and Interpreter Training at the University of Vienna in the 1980s. (Indeed, the official designation itself, which survived well into the 1990s, foregrounded skill acquisition rather than a field of study.) Without any theory-laden lectures and seminars, much could be gained from the practice-oriented instruction by experienced interpreters whom we regarded (and admired) as masters of our craft, as in the venerable tradition of masters teaching their apprentices.

The medieval tradition of the master teaching the apprentice is by no means obsolete, and in a recent book by Jürgen Stähle, one of Germany's leading conference and media interpreters, the author suggests that interpreter training should be founded on exactly this master-apprentice model (2009, pp.357-358). By the same token, though on a more recent academic foundation, David Sawyer, whose academic affiliation in Germany was the same as Stähle's (i.e. the interpreter training school at the University of Mainz at Gernersheim), observed: "Although leading interpreter education programs are situated in an academic environment, interpreter training has never truly left the realm of apprenticeship." (Sawyer, 2004, p.76)

Against this background of vocationally oriented professional training, the issue to be examined in this paper is not trivial, even though it might seem so from the perspective of a twenty-first-century academic. The difference in perspective is in fact signalled by the key concepts used interchangeably above – "interpreter education" and "interpreter training". (In fact, the former was hardly used in spoken-language interpreting circles before it appeared so prominently in the title of Sawyer's book.) We might therefore attempt to distinguish between the two, as Sawyer does when he contrasts "practical skills training" with "the scholarly acquisition of abstract knowledge" (2004, p.77). At first sight, it is the latter that would be associated with such notions as 'scholarship' and 'research', but as I intend to highlight in this paper, the two areas are closely intertwined. I will discuss this (inter)relationship under

the headings of ‘Research for’, ‘Research on’, and ‘Research in’ interpreter education, beginning with the basic question of why there should be a role for research in interpreter education in the first place.

2. Why (do) research?

Why, then, does research come into the picture of university-level interpreter education, or why should it? The most pragmatic answer derives from this very institutional status: it has become accepted (not least thanks to European precedents since the 1940s) that the education of future interpreters (and translators) should take place at university level, where the combination of teaching and research is a fundamental principle. However, such academic status cannot be taken for granted. In some domains (e.g. healthcare interpreting), and in some countries (e.g. Japan, at least until the 1990s), would-be interpreters attend courses offered by agencies outside the academic system, many of which would be future employers. (Until a few decades ago, this was also true for SCIC, the European Community’s interpreting service.) Against this backdrop, most of my remarks about the relationship between research and teaching refer to those domains of interpreting for which degree programs are offered by university-level institutions; and since many of these are still geared towards international conference settings, the research in question likewise centers on these domains.

Acknowledging that many of us are lucky enough to work in interpreter education within an academic environment, which has favourable implications not only for the status of interpreting as a profession in society but also for our own status as teachers, we would simply accept that ‘research’ and ‘science’ are part of the system, depending of course on the specific expectations and job descriptions in a given national context or even a given university.

The short answer therefore is that we are (also) dealing with research because we are expected to. This applies in particular at the department level, where there can be a division of labour between ‘scholars’, on the one hand, and those doing the day-to-day teaching, on the other. My guess is that many institutions in our field work on this basis, and my challenge here would be to show that the two components – research and teaching – can and should be more closely interrelated.

In the following section, I will therefore consider how the scholarly (‘abstract’) knowledge gained through research can be *used* in interpreter education, before moving on to the questions of when, on what and by whom research *for*, *on* and *in* interpreter education can or should be *done*.

3. Using it

Recalling that ‘research’ is understood here as a way of generating knowledge according to certain accepted rules and procedures, the most fundamental use or purpose of research in interpreter education would be a more profound, inter-subjective understanding of the phenomenon as such, that is, of interpreting as a practice. This kind of ‘basic research’ is simply a way – and, ideally, a particularly reliable way – of broadening our knowledge of interpreting beyond the professional expertise that individual interpreting instructors are expected to bring to their task. Research in this sense provides knowledge that is relevant *for* teaching and learning in the interpreting classroom (and beyond).

Research FOR

Based on my own teaching experience, I can think of a large number of questions that come up in the classroom, or even before a prospective student decides to enrol. Out of the many examples that could be mentioned here, I will merely single out a few. What about market demands, for instance? Is there a need for, in our case, conference interpreters for German? How would we answer such questions if not in the light of research findings – such as those reported by Jacquy Neff (2007) on the basis of a comprehensive survey on German as a conference language?

Or what about the relationship between interpreting and translation work, within a given curriculum or in interpreting students' choice of courses or modules? Do conference interpreters also (need to) translate? Not very much is known about this major professional issue, and the answer would of course depend on the professional context and working languages. Still, Sara Brown (2001), in an unpublished course project at the University of Tarragona, managed to elicit responses from 374 members of the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC) and found that over two-thirds of them also did translations or had done so at some point in their career.

Another professional issue that bears more directly on teaching and assessment practices relates to user expectations. How important is an interpreter's voice quality, for instance, or intonation? As we know from the user expectation surveys pioneered by Ingrid Kurz (1993), such aspects of a simultaneous interpreter's delivery are not rated very highly, but – as found in the experimental study by Ángela Collados Aís (1998) – can nevertheless have a significant impact on users' judgments of overall performance quality and even of the interpreter's professionalism. By the same token, Sandra Hale's (2004) experiments in legal settings demonstrated that an interpreter's speech style alone can affect the way a witness in court is evaluated for competence, credibility and intelligence. It goes without saying that such research findings should be taken into account in the interpreting classroom, and certainly at the time of assessment.

In addition to such an 'evidence-based' approach to professional issues like market demands, skills profiles and preferred delivery styles, research findings are also needed for a fuller understanding of the cognitive complexities of the task. There is indeed a long tradition of research efforts aimed at elucidating the mental processes in interpreting (e.g. Moser, 1978), and the variables affecting its outcome. Whether the focus is set to dual-task and memory skills (e.g. Liu et al., 2004) or to the impact of variables such as input rate and noise (Gerver, 1976) or directionality (Chang and Schallert, 2007), the findings from this kind of basic research, while not done for the benefit of improved teaching and learning practices, play a crucial role in interpreter education, as they build and extend the knowledge base on which sound instructional practices must rest. The same applies, of course, to dialogue interpreting, where the constraints that shape an interpreter's performance in a given encounter are not so much cognitive as social and interactional. Without extensive evidence of what interpreters in community settings may (need to) do, it would be hard to guide students toward professional performance, relying only on personal anecdotal experience or rigid codes of practice. In short, a teacher should ideally understand as fully as possible what she or he is teaching, and hence be familiar with the state of the art.

Further, more specific examples could be listed here to illustrate how certain questions surfacing in the teaching environment, often in the form of

‘What to do in the case of x?’, might be answered with reference to research findings. In simultaneous interpreting (SI), in particular, challenges such as a speaker’s convoluted syntax, or the telling of jokes, may require guidance with regard to appropriate strategies. In the master-apprentice model, the answer would likely be given in terms of ‘How I do it’, and such sharing of professional experience can certainly be of great value. But what if there is more than one strategic option? Which is better? Here the answer requires an evidence-based approach – as supplied, for instance, by Chris Meuleman and Fred Van Besien (2009) regarding the issue of syntactic complexity. In an experiment involving sixteen professional interpreters they sought to find out whether restructuring or ‘tailing’ was the more promising strategy for coping with extreme syntactic complexity (up to eight levels of subordinate clauses). Though their findings were not clear-cut, they demonstrated that either strategy can be effective for some interpreters, with a tendency toward higher success rates for restructuring.

As far as jokes are concerned, very little is known about their frequency of occurrence and interpreters’ ways of coping with them. Pavlicek and Pöchhacker (2002) reported some survey findings and observational data, highlighting the various functional and linguistic factors that determine the translatability of humour in SI. Even so, observational data from authentic interpreter-mediated events are still sorely lacking for this as well as most other issues for which an evidentiary basis for strategic guidance in the classroom would be desirable.

Research ON

This bottleneck in the field of interpreter education also affects major topics relating to instructional practices. For all the steep rise in the number of university-level interpreter training programs worldwide, we know very little about what actually transpires in the interpreting classroom, or at the stage of admission to the program. As far as the latter is concerned, screening applicants for aptitude has been a long-standing practice in many institutions, without much solid evidence that the tasks and tests administered are predictive of successful skill development in interpreting. Aside from Moser’s (1978) work on course-based screening, the most comprehensive study on aptitude testing was done in the early 1980s by Gerver et al. (1989) and it was not until a quarter-century later that this issue was taken up again on a comparable scale. (The Symposium on Aptitude for Interpreting, held in May 2009 at Lessius University College in Antwerp, is particularly noteworthy in this respect, also for bringing together researchers from the field of signed-language as well as spoken-language interpreting.) Despite some new proposals (e.g. Russo and Pippa, 2004), the search for a set of tests to screen for both cognitive skills and personal qualities in would-be interpreters continues.

As regards research on instructional practices as such, the need for further research is no less acute. Admittedly, the literature contains a considerable number of proposals for teaching-related topics ranging from shadowing exercises to note-taking instruction and constructive feedback, but few researchers have attempted or managed to demonstrate the effectiveness of one teaching approach or another.

The controversy over shadowing is a good example. While arguments about the merits and perils of shadowing exercises are well documented (e.g. Kurz, 1992), there is little, if any, solid evidence to support either position. A notable exception is the study by Milzow and Wiesenhütter (1995) at the University of Geneva, who administered a shadowing task to novice as well as professional interpreters and found less accurate performance in the latter

group. Their results suggest that shadowing may be a poor approximation of the sort of meaning-based processing required in interpreting, and hence possibly counterproductive. Nevertheless, with only five subjects per group, these experimental findings are still in need of corroboration.

Even without venturing into experimental research on the effectiveness of a given instructional practice, one finds that there is also a surprising lack of descriptive data – surprising because the access limitations that often hamper descriptive fieldwork in international conference as well as community-based institutional settings should be more manageable in the academic environment. The pioneering study by Eva Paneth (1957), who observed conference interpreter training practices in several institutions on the Continent, is still unmatched, and systematic data on what goes on in the interpreting classroom, let alone on what seems to work best, are often lacking even within a given program. Thus, a survey in twenty-five SI classes in eleven different languages at my own institution (Pöchlhammer, 1999) yielded highly uneven findings regarding the type of input speech material used (read/impromptu, live/audio/video) and the teachers' approach to correction and feedback. Interestingly, the use of written texts read in class was underrated by the twenty-two teachers compared to the experience of the 140 students in the survey. Moreover, only 12% of respondents indicated that feedback was given by playing back students' recorded performance, whereas 16% reported receiving corrections while interpreting, by teachers interrupting delivery of the input speech. The latter practice had also been observed – and found questionable – in Paneth's (1957) study and suggests that some teaching practices owe more to tradition than to the continuous refinement of teaching practices based on shared experience and, where available, systematic research. This confirms Daniel Gile's pessimistic assessment of the impact of training-oriented research:

It does not seem to have had any significant effect on training methods and results except in courses given by the researchers themselves, and sometimes in the schools where they teach, but on the whole, interpretation instructors prefer to keep their personal, most often traditional methods, and take no heed of research (Gile, 1990, p.33).

Two decades later, it is not clear whether the situation has changed, but a few reasons for a more optimistic view can be discerned. Most importantly, university-level interpreter education has undergone a process of academisation, and many institutions now expect or require their full-time teaching staff to have or earn a doctoral degree. The basic tenet of the "training paradigm" as articulated by Jennifer Mackintosh (1995, p.124), i.e. that "the syllabus for consecutive and simultaneous interpretation should be designed and taught by practicing conference interpreters, preferably AIIC members", may still be valid, but is not necessarily sufficient for a university lectureship. AIIC itself has moved ahead in this regard, offering 'Training the trainers' courses that, with few exceptions, are still lacking within interpreter education institutions themselves, which should be expected to play a more prominent role in didactic development, given the increasing diversification of what is to be taught.

Another reason to expect a closer integration of research and teaching is the fact that those joining the ranks of teaching staff are more likely nowadays to have been exposed to research in their own studies. Furthermore, those interested in engaging or keeping up with the literature on interpreting now have convenient access to dedicated reference works and journals, so that reading research and using it has become easier than ever before.

4. Doing it

As had to be conceded in the previous section, the opportunity of interpreter educators to apply research to their teaching and assessment practices is often limited by the lack of relevant or solid findings. Therefore, the vital issue regarding the role of research in interpreter education is not so much, or not only, that of *using* research but also that of *doing* research in the first place. But who should be doing it?

In the early days of research on interpreting, research findings would have been supplied by specialists in such fields as psychology, applied linguistics or sociology. Indeed, even in the early 1990s, Gile (1994), pointing to the lack of research training among so-called ‘practisearchers’, suggested that advanced research required the collaboration of experts in the cognitive sciences. This situation appears to have been changing, as more and more scholars with a background in interpreting have sought to acquire the research skills needed to conduct state-of-the-art projects in a given domain. Most typically, new research findings in interpreting studies come from doctoral researchers who are graduates of an interpreter training program and, more often than not, teachers of interpreting. It is for researchers with this prototypical profile that one might ask, in the thematic context of this paper, what sort of research ought to be done; that is, *what* should be studied, and *how*.

Research ON

Based on my experience with several PhD schools in translation and interpreting studies, the logical choice of topic for many doctoral students with the above background seems to be ‘something related to teaching’. At the very least, the research project, even when somewhat removed from the immediate teaching environment, will often be expected to yield insights that can help improve training practices.

In its strongest version, such research would seek to test the effectiveness of a particular curricular design, teaching method, exercise or learning approach. Examples might include questions like the following:

- Should consecutive interpreting skills be a prerequisite for training in the booth?
- Should sight translation be taught and tested as a separate skill?
- Should students work into or between their B languages?
- Should a given source speech be worked on repeatedly?
- Should there be drill exercises for certain problem triggers, such as numbers?
- Which are the exercises that are most effective in developing interpreting skills?

All of these questions, many of which are not yet formulated with sufficient precision, are of interest and worthy of an in-depth study. The limitations, however, are obvious: group sizes in a given language combination are usually small and skill levels uneven, quite apart from individual variability in many other respects. Moreover, when alternative teaching approaches are at issue, there is the ethical question of whether students can be exposed to an experimental ‘treatment’ of unknown benefit, or to a less effective control

condition, or whether they are obliged to participate in a research study to begin with.

Many of these concerns apply in particular to experimental designs, where independent variables need to be controlled and the effect of the experimental condition should be amenable to accurate measurement – a major challenge with dependent variables such as ‘performance’ or ‘progress in skill development’. In many cases, therefore, an experimental design relying on quantitative parameters to test a hypothesis regarding the effect of a particular didactic intervention will be extremely difficult to implement and may not yield conclusive results. A case in point is the doctoral research project by Jessica Pérez-Luzardo Díaz (2005), who set out to test the effectiveness of practicing component skills of SI, such as expressive fluency, memory, dual-tasking and anticipation, before proceeding to training in the booth. Her subjects were thirteen students in her own fourth-year German-Spanish SI course at the University of Las Palmas, and two control groups of six students each, one enrolled in a local parallel course and one in the postgraduate Master’s course at the University of La Laguna. Using an overall pre-test–post-test design, the author developed a battery of preliminary exercises and administered them in her class throughout the semester. Based on a wealth of post-test results, which included an assessment of linguistic and cognitive skills comparable to the baseline tests as well as an SI task (a fourteen minute speech in German delivered at a rate of 100 words per minute), the author finds evidence that her exercises can help students with comparable baseline values achieve better performance on strategic tasks in SI, such as restructuring and synthesis, than students in the local control group. Nevertheless, the author is aware of the great heterogeneity of her subject groups, and of the fundamental challenge of ‘objective’ assessment (on a five-point grading scale). Acknowledging the limits of quantification in her experimental design, she offers various types of qualitative data, including results of a motivational survey and a self-assessment exercise as well as marked-up transcriptions.

This example of a highly ambitious and extremely labour-intensive didactic research project serves to illustrate the many threats to validity posed by this kind of experimental design. At the same time, it points the way to more descriptive studies relying, and indeed capitalising on, the wealth of qualitative data to be collected in the classroom setting. Even though such designs may not permit clear-cut answers to the major didactic questions listed above, they can at least supply a more systematic documentation of instructional practices, and possibly yield patterns that take account of individual variability and personal learning styles. Thus, the small group sizes that are a major liability in quantification-based controlled studies can be turned into an asset when the research strategy is one of ‘fieldwork’ in the classroom and, typically, case study, allowing for triangulation of data and methods based on (participant) observation, interviews, focus groups, recordings and other documentary material (e.g. notes, portfolios).

An example of such a fundamentally qualitative approach, though not without seeking strength also in numbers, is the doctoral thesis by Emma Soler Caamaño (2006), who analysed the comments made by seven examiners (professional interpreters) on the performance of eighteen participants in a three-month postgraduate course on medical conference interpreting. Based on the transcriptions of eight hours of recorded exam session comments, the author identified 153 assessment criteria and reduced these to sixty-seven assessment parameters, whose frequency and relationships were subjected to further quantitative analysis. While the author did not examine the candidates’ interpretations, her comprehensive and well-documented qualitative data analysis, from which she derived a set of six evaluation constructs (cognitive management, product quality, interpreting

strategies, quality of language, delivery and professionalism), clearly constitutes an inspiring case of fieldwork in the area of assessment.

This sort of fieldwork strategy for research on interpreter education, using a range of observational methods to collect predominantly qualitative data, would seem to lend itself well to studies moving on from where Paneth's (1957) work left off, focusing on issues like sight translation and note-taking exercises or procedures for feedback and correction. An interesting example of qualitative data analysis in the framework of the psychology of expertise is Barbara Moser-Mercer's (2000) account of the difficulties encountered by fifty-five students during the first six months of training in SI.

In addition to such core topics relating to skill development in interpreting, there is a broad range of phenomena that have emerged with the introduction of new technologies and have yet to be explored in the classroom setting. Examples include the use of portable equipment for whispered SI, re-speaking-based live subtitling with voice recognition, voice-recorder-assisted consecutive interpreting (e.g. Pöchhacker, 2007) and, not least, various forms of remote interpreting, particularly in small-scale dialogic settings (e.g. Braun, 2007).

Beyond research on how students learn to master – and how instructors teach – such new technology-assisted modes of interpreting, technology use is a major topic of research also in the didactic domain as such. Notable examples include the report by Hansen and Schlesinger (2007) on the use of digital lab equipment to permit self-paced consecutive exercises and video-based role-plays for dialogue interpreting, and the comprehensive five-year study by Jesús de Manuel (2006) on the use of graded video speech material at all levels of SI instruction.

The large-scale doctoral study by de Manuel is remarkable not only for its focus on the use of digital video technology but also for its design as a participatory action-research project in which students are treated as stakeholders and research partners rather than mere suppliers of empirical data. And this idea of empowering students in the research process brings me to my final consideration – on the role of students in research on interpreter education.

Research IN

To what extent research is a part of interpreting students' educational experience is mainly a matter of the curriculum. Where the focus is on vocational training, and the theoretical component limited to a few background lectures, students' exposure to research will be minimal. In a more academic format, in contrast, a two-year MA course, while still focused on professional skill development, might include lectures and seminars as well as a thesis requirement. Though the standards for MA theses in interpreting studies may vary from one program (and supervisor) to another, there is no doubt that they account for a large share of the empirical research done in our field.

Where the curriculum envisages that students complete an MA thesis, the questions to be asked are, again, *what* should be studied, and *how*. And while students may have less inclination than their course leaders to focus on issues of teaching and learning, I would nevertheless argue that the kind of research *on* teaching and assessment practices suggested above can benefit greatly from the involvement of MA thesis candidates as research (wo)manpower rather than 'subjects'. With case studies in the classroom setting typically generating an abundance of qualitative data, some projects may indeed become manageable only thanks to this valuable human resource. Action research with and by students, in collaboration with teachers and even on

their instructional practices, may therefore hold special promise for research *on* teaching and assessment *in* interpreter education, though the challenges involved must not be overlooked. There is no doubt that collaborative participatory research requires a high level of maturity, self-reflection and mutual trust – and certainly a teacher-student relationship that has transcended the tradition of knowing master and emulating apprentice.

5. Conclusion

My main point in these reflections on the role of research in interpreter education may have been too obvious for many, and yet not convincing enough for those with a more traditional background in practice-oriented training. Without disregarding the value of an instructor's rich professional experience, I have highlighted the need for 'evidence-based' teaching, which can draw on various types of contributions to the interpreting studies literature. To begin with, I have suggested that practically any study of interpreting (i.e. 'basic research') can be considered 'Research *for*' interpreter education by virtue of helping us gain a fuller understanding of interpreting as a cognitive process, linguistic skill and social practice. Proceeding to 'Research *on*' interpreter education in the more immediate sense, I have pointed to the significant methodological challenges involved in answering some of the major curricular or didactic questions on the basis of controlled experimental designs. As a more viable alternative, I have suggested fieldwork in the classroom setting, often on the basis of case studies drawing on a range of predominantly qualitative data. And given the considerable time and effort required for such studies, I have advocated a move toward participatory research in the classroom setting, done by those who teach in collaboration with those who learn, ultimately empowering the latter and inducting them early on into the community of professional practice.

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