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Learning simultaneous interpretation into the B language: a case study

Jeanne DISDERO-LEE
CLESTHIA, Université Sorbonne Nouvelle – Paris 3
j.disdero.lee@gmail.com

RESUME

Après avoir examiné le cadre théorique et les travaux empiriques existants dans le domaine de l'enseignement de l'interprétation simultanée vers la langue B, nous aborderons la définition du protocole de recherche appliqué à une étude de cas concernant un petit échantillon d'étudiants en dernière année de Master d'interprétation de conférence, suivi d'une discussion des résultats et des perspectives qui s'en dégagent. Dans cette étude de cas, cinq étudiants francophones ayant l'anglais comme langue B ont interprété en simultanée vers l'anglais un discours en français, et leur prestation a été enregistrée. Il leur a ensuite été demandé d'écouter l'enregistrement de leur prestation en anglais et de la commenter là où ils avaient quelque chose à dire. Leurs commentaires respectifs ont été analysés dans le cadre conceptuel du Modèle d'efforts de D. Gile et fournissent un éclairage sur les problèmes qu'ils ont perçus.

***Mots-clés** : interprétation simultanée – étude empirique – rétrospection – langue B – directionnalité*

ABSTRACT

After taking a look at the theoretical framework and existing empirical studies in the field of interpreter training into the B language, this article will present the design of a study applied to a small sample of students in their last year of a Master's Degree program in Conference Interpretation, followed by a discussion of the results and the outlook. In this case study, five French-speaking students in their second year of a two-year Master's degree program in conference interpretation with English as their B language interpreted a speech from French into English, while being recorded. The students were then asked to listen to the recording of their performance in English and make comments when they felt it was warranted. Their respective comments were analyzed within the conceptual framework of D. Gile's Efforts Model and provide insight into the problems that the learners perceived.

***Keywords:** simultaneous interpretation – empirical study – retrospection – B language – directionality*

1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

1.1 Is there an advantage to working in one direction over another and what are the impacts for interpreter training? The position of the traditional schools of thought

Before examining the comparable studies in the field of interpreter training into the B language, it is useful to review the position of the traditional schools of thought regarding directionality in simultaneous interpretation (interpreting into one's native language only or into one's non-native active language). The Paris School's position has been extensively described in the literature. For its main proponents, D. Seleskovitch and M. Lederer (2002), it is the concomitant presence of both languages that results in interference during simultaneous interpretation. They consider that students are less apt to notice inconsistencies in the B language than in the A language due to the constant auditive contact with their native language while interpreting in this direction. Furthermore, there is a greater tendency to transcode (i.e. translate word-for-word) grammatical and lexical units because these units are familiar to them. For these authors, the interpretation technique must be fully-integrated and the B language consciously activated (in terms of phonology, vocabulary, grammar and colloquial expressions) in order to avoid transcoding. Last, they underscore the importance of the type of speech*:* in their opinion, interpretation into the B language is best adapted to source speeches that are narrative or descriptive, for which terminology is key and that can therefore be prepared ahead of time, regardless of the direction involved.

The so-called Russian School maintains that understanding a message is crucial to being able to interpret it. This position is illustrated in the arguments put forth by J. Denissenko (1989), for whom it is obvious that comprehension is greater in one's native language and that this understanding enables better interpretation into a B language that is fully mastered. A complete message delivered with a slight accent or in slightly less natural wording is preferable to a perfectly-pronounced, elegantly-worded but ultimately erroneous or incomplete message. Moreover, he underscores that without having understood the original message, it is impossible to render it correctly and that once information has been missed in simultaneous interpretation, it is not possible to back up and listen to it again. Last, he emphasizes the importance of language enhancement and the many hours of instructor-monitored training and practice necessary to achieve a sufficient level of mastery of the simultaneous interpretation technique.

1.2 Daniel Gile's Effort Models and the Tightrope Hypothesis

The traditional arguments in favor of either side of the directionality debate present sound advice for interpreter training, notably in terms of the potential pitfalls associated with working into the B language and how to avoid them. However, beyond reasoning solely in terms of one direction yielding intrinsically better results than the other, it is also possible to focus on the cognitive aspects of the interpreting task itself. Simultaneous interpretation involves a series of tasks that take place nearly at the same time, call upon short-term memory storage, must be coordinated and require substantial

cognitive resources, bearing in mind that these resources are finite, as set forth in D. Gile's Efforts Model of simultaneous interpreting (described in the equation below).

$$SI = L + P + M + C$$

In which:

SI: Simultaneous interpreting

L: Listening and Analysis Effort

P: Speech production Effort

M: Short-term memory Effort

C: Coordination Effort

D. Gile furthermore describes operational processing capacity requirements during simultaneous interpreting in the following equation:

$$TR = LR + MR + PR + CR$$

In which:

TR: Total processing capacity requirements

LR: processing requirements for L

MR: processing requirements for M

PR: processing requirements for P

CR: processing requirements for C

As outlined by D. Gile (2005b), "In order for interpreting to proceed smoothly, two conditions must be met: Firstly, the sum of requirements from the three Efforts plus the coordination Efforts should not exceed the total available processing capacity. Secondly, at every moment, the processing capacity available for each Effort should be sufficient to cope with the task at hand, i.e. comprehension of a particular speech segment, storage and/or retrieval of required pieces of information from the incoming

speech, and retrieval from long-term memory and production of the correct lexical units and grammatical structures to express whatever needs to be verbalized at that time in the target speech. When these two conditions are not met, two types of problems may occur: errors and omissions crop up and/or the linguistic quality of the output declines".

Moreover, D. Gile (2009, pp. 182-183) sets forth a Tightrope Hypothesis, according to which interpreters generally work close to saturation "be it in terms of total processing capacity requirements or as regards individual Efforts because of high Effort-specific requirements and/or suboptimal allocation of resources to each of them. Without the Tightrope Hypothesis, the natural assumption would be that available processing capacity is sufficient to cover all the needs and that interpreting failures are due to insufficient linguistic or extralinguistic knowledge or mistakes rather than to chronic cognitive tension between processing capacity supply and demand". In addressing the issue of directionality in interpreting, D. Gile (2009, pp. 237-238) further states that "In view of the Tightrope Hypothesis […] it therefore seems reasonable to assume that in many cases, when the general linguistic proficiency of the interpreter is high, the distinction between his/her A language and B language may be less important than his/her familiarity with the relevant LSPs in each of the languages concerned ".

2. STATE OF THE ART AND LIMITS

2.1 Empirical studies on directionality in interpreter training

A variety of empirical studies have been carried out on small samples of student interpreters based on recordings and the subsequent transcriptions of their simultaneous interpretation of short speeches (ranging from 4 to 10 minutes) delivered by live speakers, retrospective interviews and questionnaires on their language background. Several authors of such empirical studies, in a variety of language pairs, have not observed marked differences in accuracy attributable to directionality. J. Tommola and M. Helevä (1998) observed for the language pair Finnish-English that "when texts are linguistically simple, the percent accuracy score is identical in both directions of interpretation, but with more complex material, there is a hint of A to B direction being more easily manageable for trainee interpreters.". It is important to stress that this study measured the amount of content conveyed rather than style or absence of linguistic errors.

T. Beauregard Timms (2000) carried out a study on a group of four interpretation students in their 6th month of training. After a brief (5 minute) warm-up exercise, the group interpreted a first speech from French into English, followed by a second speech from English into French. Both speeches lasted 10 minutes. The interpretation was recorded then retranscribed. The analysis of the omissions, additions and substitutions suggested that the errors made were the result of complex grammatical structures and not of the complexity of the information interpreted itself.

Other authors, however, have recorded a greater number of errors made by students or experienced interpreters while working into their B language. G. Vik-Tuovinen (1995) examined the progress of four students interpreting from Finnish to Swedish. One striking finding in her analysis is that, contrary to the widely-held belief that interference is a phenomenon characteristic of simultaneous interpretation into the B language (K. Déjean 2005), the two students working into their A language made mistakes in terms of word choice, word order and inflection, although the overall number of errors was lower than for the two students working into their B language. G. Vik-Tuovinen posits that this would seem to evidence cases of cognitive overload.

M. Bartlomiejczyk (2006) carried out a study on directionality involving a larger sample of 36 students (Polish A, English B) to identify the strategies used during simultaneous direction in either direction (A and B). Students interpreted speeches in both directions, after which they recorded their retrospective comments on the strategies they used. These strategies varied widely, depending on the individual, and the author underscored the role that various factors such as talent, motivation, level of fatigue, cognitive style and knowledge of the respective languages play in the choice of these strategies. The results indicated that the strategies opted for differed according to whether they interpreted into their A or B language. According to the author, some of these differences may be related to the specificity of this language combination, but most were due to directionality.

2.2 Limits to experimental research in Interpreting Studies

M. Liu (2016) outlines the various methodological challenges that arise in experimental research in Interpreting Studies, in particular regarding what she terms the "woes of small sample size" and the need for sound study design. She explains why it is important when carrying out controlled experiments to ensure that a sample is as homogenous as possible to improve internal validity and to use a sample that is similar to the target population. She furthermore stresses that replication, "the process of reproducing a study using the same methods, different participants, and different researchers, and sometimes with slight changes made by adding additional variables (Heffner, 2015)", is the only means of achieving generalizability.

G. Vik-Tuovinen (2002) highlights the nature of the information that can be gathered regarding the process of simultaneous interpretation via quantitative and qualitative oral retrospective data and notably the fact that "no concurrent introspection or thinking aloud is possible during the actual performance of the interpretation." The caveats being that "not all decisions made by the interpreter during interpretation are conscious nor are they all remembered" and that interpreter recall may not be completely reliable and thus other sources of information about the process should be used. She considers it is a valid method for obtaining information on participants' thoughts and the strategies used during simultaneous interpretation. She also underscores the need to avoid a significant lag between the interpretation and the retrospective comments in order to reduce the likelihood of faulty recall.

The study described below was devised with the following research questions in mind: Can retrospection be used to help pinpoint or confirm areas of cognitive overload as evidenced by student disfluencies? Does self-awareness of these disfluencies after the fact help students in overcoming deficient self-monitoring? What can instructors learn from student retrospection in terms of subsequent performance appraisal and diagnostics? The sample size in this study is small and not statistically representative, however it is hoped that these findings may make a modest contribution to the debate.

3. PRESENTATION OF THE STUDY

3.1 Population

This corpus is comprised of recordings made of five students enrolled in their second year of a two-year Master's degree in conference interpretation. Three were enrolled during the academic year 2016-17 and two were enrolled in 2017-18. Four had never repeated either their first year or their second year of study and one student had been previously enrolled in two conference interpretation degree programs that he did not complete and that did not entail training in simultaneous interpretation into a B language. All five had successfully passed their entrance exam in consecutive interpretation and sight translation (English to French and French to English) into second year on their first try. All five were thus capable of interpreting in consecutive mode from their native language into their active non-native language. All five participants were in their first year of training in simultaneous interpretation from their native language French into their active non-native language, English. The participants can therefore be considered to be novices as regards simultaneous interpreting into their B language.

In addition to the recorded interpretation and retrospective comments, the participants completed a questionnaire on their language background, ages and nationality. Two women and three men took part in the study. Three of the participants are French, one is Moroccan, and one is Belgian. At the time of the study, their ages ranged between 21 and 48 years, with a median age of 25 years and an average age of 30 years. Three of the five participants grew up speaking a second language at home and all five began learning English between the ages of 3 and 10 (median age and average age: 6 years). All five participants had spent time abroad in an English-speaking country, ranging between 2 weeks and 4 consecutive years (average stay: 2 years, median stay: 1 year). English is therefore a fluent second language for all five participants, which they all began studying before the age of 10 and that they consolidated through at least one stay abroad in an English-speaking country.

3.2 Study design

The students were recorded in three groups: In April 2017, a first group of two students was recorded, followed by a separate recording of one student two weeks later (who was absent at the first session). In April 2016, a group of two students was recorded under the same conditions: In the same room, with the same interpreting equipment, with the same speaker on the same speech.

The topic of the speech was Uber and the impact of the gig economy on workers. The speech was drafted and delivered by a conference interpreter who is accustomed to delivering practice speeches in French, his native language, for interpretation students. It was "oralized", meaning that the sentence structures were not complex, the subject of sentences was repeated frequently, the ideas and terms were clearly delineated and readily understandable by a layperson. There were no obscure notions: The topics mentioned by the speaker had been covered extensively in the media while the few historical events referred to were also public knowledge. The students had already interpreted speeches by this same speaker and recorded themselves on three other occasions. They were thus familiar with his speaking style.

The exercise began with a ten-minute brainstorming session in English led by the speaker to activate the vocabulary in English related to the topic and encourage the students to anticipate what types of facts or arguments could be presented. The interpreted speech was then recorded by the students on their respective smartphones in mp3 format and transcribed by the researcher afterward. During the retrospection session, the students were instructed to listen to the recording, stopping it to comment their performance when they felt it was warranted, and notably when they had experienced difficulties, in order to describe what was happening. These comments were recorded in turn on a separate digital device (computer or smartphone). Several recalled their performance in such detail that they were able to comment problem segments slightly before they occurred in the recording, while others made comments triggered either by hearing the beginning or the end of a specific segment.

Although the majority of the retrospective comments were made directly after the simultaneous interpretation exercise, due to time constraints two students (B and C) commented their performance several days later, in the presence of the researcher/instructor, which triggered a brief dialogue between the student and the instructor regarding certain parts of the recording.

4. RESULTS OF THE STUDY AND OUTLOOK

4.1 Results of the study

The number of segments corresponds to the number of times the students stopped the recording to comment their performance. The number of output-related segments corresponds to the number of comments involving what the student was saying in English (e.g. word choice, self-monitoring of output, pronunciation). The number of input-related segments corresponds to the number of comments involving the original message in French (issues with understanding or lag). Percentages are also provided. It can be seen that for all five students there are a greater number of comments concerning output, which might lead one to wonder whether the rendering of this particular speech in the B language (as opposed to the understanding and analyzing of the message in the A language) presents greater challenges.

	NUMBER OF:		
STUDENT	Segments	Output-related segments	Input-related segments
A	24	18 (75%)	6 (25%)
B	25	22 (88%)	3 (12%)
C	31	24 (77%)	7 (23%)
D	17	12 (71%)	5 (29%)
E	17	12 (71%)	5 (29%)

Table 1: Retrospective comments

4.1.1 Output-related segments

Word choice was frequently brought up by the students in their comments: "I had a hard time finding the words", "I don't know if there's a specific term in English for that", "I remember hesitating to say that because the original was more moderate", "I could have said something else", "I didn't know how to say that", "It was smooth and then all of a sudden I couldn't find the word and everything fell apart". They also often attempted to find equivalents during the self-assessment session, with varying degrees of success: "I said *bureautic* but I imagine it's *office work* or something like that", "*paid by the task* would have been preferable to *for every mission*", "*dans une course…in a drive?*", "Maybe say *there is more freedom and more flexibility but only in appearance*", "*Footing in the door*? I hope I used it right". This highlights the fact that English is not their native language and thus, even when not subject to the time pressure experienced under simultaneous interpretation conditions, they are not always certain of the appropriate terminology or colloquial expressions to be used as equivalents for terms or expressions that they understand thoroughly in French, their native language. While interpreting, these gaps in their lexical knowledge in English can cause them to lose track of the speaker's line of reasoning, which up to that point they had been able to follow, as they search for an appropriate approximate term, expression or paraphrase. D. Gile (2009, pp. 171-173) describes such failure sequences with regard to his Efforts Model: "Insufficient availability of processing capacity for an Effort may also be the consequence of a whole chain of events which can last several seconds: For instance, the interpreter may be devoting too much processing capacity to the Production Effort in an attempt to produce elegant wording in the target speech: This leaves him or her with insufficient processing capacity for the Listening and Analysis Effort, an ulterior speech segment is missed, and cannot be rendered.". This is reflected in the students' comments: "Here I got behind because I couldn't find the term", "I stumbled a bit as I was trying to think of how to say *short-term job contract* versus *long-term job contract* and so I lagged a bit behind because of the few seconds it took to formulate it in English.".

Self-monitoring. It was only while listening to the recording that the students were able to hear certain disfluencies that escaped their notice while interpreting: “I don’t think I was listening to myself enough while I was speaking”, “here my attention lapsed, I wasn’t listening to myself”, “I didn’t see the link at the time but now it seems obvious to me”. This necessary component of simultaneous interpretation had not yet been fully consolidated by this group of students and listening to the recording was a means of becoming aware of its importance.

Activation. It is important to differentiate between cases where the students did not know how to express a concept in English and therefore attempted an approximation (paraphrase or word expressing a similar concept) and cases when they knew the word but were unable to activate this knowledge in time to say it in English while maintaining their momentum in interpreting. The effort required to attempt to recall the wording often caused them to miss the following idea or lag too far behind and overload their short-term memory. In his Gravitational Model of language availability, D. Gile (2009, pp. 226-237) explains the types of availability and the implications for conference interpreting. “it is assumed that interpreting, and in particular simultaneous interpreting, requires virtually all available processing capacity, which makes the interpreter vulnerable to phenomena such as increased short-term memory load arising from linguistic phenomena that would have no practical consequence in everyday verbal interaction (including lexical or syntactic ambiguity, complex syntax, convoluted logic, slips of the tongue, etc.). Under these circumstances, high language availability can make all of the difference between success and failure in an interpreting task.”. In the recordings examined in the present case study, this holds particularly true for colloquial expressions. “I heard the original but I didn’t react quickly enough to find the term in English”, “Often I can’t find the words for day-to-day things we don’t talk about much in class… it’s difficult to activate”.

Pronunciation and prosody. The comments on pronunciation concerned examples of single words, with two participants not mentioning this topic at all. One participant commented on his prosody: “I get the impression that my pacing is French” while another noticed a tendency not to articulate certain words clearly. As most of the students spoke very clear English learned from an early age, it is not surprising that the number of comments in this category were limited.

4.1.2 Input-related segments

Understanding of the original message. At times the students did not understand the original message although it was in their native language. Devoting additional attention (thus cognitive resources) to the production effort takes away the attention necessary to follow the logic tying together the arguments being presented or the flow of events being described. Not hearing one segment forced the students to wait for additional information in order to piece together what was being said. In doing so, they began to accumulate a longer lag, which taxed their short-term memory and led to disfluencies in their output. D. Gile (2009, pp. 224-226) already described this phenomenon in his discussion on language

comprehension and availability. “When comprehension availability is low, the speed of processing is slowed down and lag accumulates.”. In the feedback provided by the students, this is evidenced by comments such as “I didn’t know what he was referring to”, “I didn’t know what the numbers referred to”, “I tried to base myself on what seemed most logical to me”, “It was only afterward that I understood”, “I misunderstood the French” or “there was some misunderstanding also, which is really surprising given that it’s in French”. Interpreter C underscores this phenomenon several times during the speech, stating at one point that “when I understand the idea it’s so much easier”.

Numbers. A series of statistics were provided during one part of the speech, which caused problems for all five students. None of them rendered all of the statistics correctly and, contrary to accepted practice in the booth, all of them reported having failed to write down the numbers when they heard them as this would have created yet another task to be managed with their limited resources.

Ear-voice span (lag). “I don’t understand how I can be behind and at the same time calque the syntax” or “I didn’t hear what the speaker said”. EVS is not considered in this study as a separate category, as it was always mentioned in conjunction with either the student’s understanding of the original message (therefore as a cause of understanding issues) or word choice (therefore as a cause or result of the lag itself): “I didn’t hear the beginning so I didn’t understand the link between the two ideas”, “Here I had a lag of a few seconds and I decided to drop it because I wasn’t completely sure of myself ”, “I think that it was a lag issue, it was difficult to get closer”, “I wasn’t able to find an equivalent because I didn’t want to say Word or Excel and therefore I got very, very far behind there”. The students’ comments on EVS seem to indicate cases when they felt overwhelmed by the tasks they needed to accomplish simultaneously, resulting in an excessive lag, which would seem to pinpoint instances of cognitive overload.

4.2 Conclusion and outlook

The study described in this article was aimed at examining student performance into the B language, and to gain insight into cases of potential cognitive overload from the student’s point of view. Based upon the information gathered over two consecutive years, it would be possible to compare student-identified disfluencies with the instructor-identified disfluencies with a view towards gaining greater knowledge as regards the obstacles identified by students, their perception of these hurdles and the overall learning process during the students’ first steps in simultaneous interpretation into a B language. This study is intended to be replicated a third time in April 2019. It may be useful to draw up individual student profiles based upon both the learner and instructor descriptions and identify any characteristic errors that may be specific to the language pair (French to English) as opposed to individual strategies (see Gile, 2005a). Comparisons with existing research in this field could help point towards patterns and enhance instructor training into the B language.

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