Students' Perceptions of Out-of-Booth Exercises in Simultaneous Interpreting Training: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

The proliferation of courses, masters, and degrees in which simultaneous interpreting is taught leads us to believe that the famous phrase of Jennifer Mackintosh's book "Interpreters are made, not born" (1999) is an accurate statement. However, we believe that the teaching of simultaneous interpreting should include training outside the booth, with exercises to improve students' performance in simultaneous interpreting. Nevertheless, as interpreter trainers, we encounter students who are eager to go directly into the booth and who are reluctant to devote part of the training hours to exercises that do not directly involve simultaneous interpreting. For this reason, the aim of our research is to study the initial perceptions of simultaneous interpreting trainees and how they change once the real usefulness of certain exercises has been verified. To this end, we performed a quantitative-qualitative research with students in the 4th year of the degree in Translation and Interpreting from two different universities and with two different language combinations, in order to offer results also on the basis of this variant. For this purpose, we conducted an initial survey and a final one after the completion of the proposed set of exercises (clozing, time lag, anticipation, improvisation and discourse analysis). We present the data obtained in terms of the complexity, usefulness and main difficulty perceived for each exercise, as well as the change of perspective experienced by the students.

1. Introduction

Translating and interpreting have a common basis: knowledge of the different languages and the corresponding source and target cultures. However, in the specific case of simultaneous interpreting (SI), the future interpreter should have a set of knowledges, skills and personal qualities (Moser-Mercer, 1994, pp. 58-62) which are not entirely innate and which, according to Mackintosh (1999, p. 67) can be taught and developed, with the aim of creating a series of more or less universal application strategies that the future professional could use in his/her daily work (Alonso Bacigalupe, 2001, p. 21).

Many scholars (Torres Díaz, 2000b; Darías & Pérez-Luzardo, 2003; Lambert, 1992; Van Besien, 1999; Vázquez y del Árbol, 2005; Iglesias Fernández, 2007) have concluded that there are exercises that contribute to the development of these strategies and for which direct work inside the booth is not necessary. However, the challenge for the lecturer is to make the students, who are eager to enter the booth (Bartłomiejczyk, 2009, p. 412), see the importance of performing these exercises at the beginning of their training process.

The aim of this article is to present the change of perception in students regarding these out-of-booth exercises (in this case, clozing, time lag, anticipation, improvisation and discourse analysis), which allow them to activate their previous knowledge, thus, their motivation in some cases, and apply it to the new discipline (Krause & Stark, p. 2006).

1.1 The Interpreter's Competences

Even though translating and interpreting share the same basic requirement (knowledge of the source and target languages and cultures), interpreting compels some special competences. Already at the Nuremberg trials and given the fact that there was no training in SI, the selection of interpreters by the head of interpretation was based on languages command, broad general culture, composure, and ability to speak in public (Baigorri Jalón, 2000, p. 280).

Moser-Mercer (1994, pp. 58-62) provides an overview of the competences sought and assessed in entrance exams for

specialized conference interpreting courses. In this regard, the author divides the competences into 3 groups: 1) knowledge, 2) skills, and 3) personal qualities. In the first category, the candidate is expected to have a solid knowledge of both his/her mother tongue and working language, as well as a broad general culture. In terms of skills, the candidate must be able to comprehend, synthesize, analyze and produce at a certain speed. The abilities to memorize, listen and speak simultaneously, voice modulation and good diction are also valued. Finally, among the personal qualities, stress tolerance, resilience and possible learning curves stand out (i.e., how to improve performance with the experience gained in daily work).

The establishment of schools and training courses shows that many of these competences would not be completely innate and could be taught and developed (Mackintosh, 1999, p. 67).

2. Elements Influencing SI Performance: Strategies, Factors and Schemas

Strategy acquisition is considered a key element of interpreting training by trainers and trainees (Dong, Li & Zhao, 2019). While working, the interpreter decodes a message by means of different strategies in order to build, thanks to the activation of mental semantic sectors, a mental representation of what is heard, and then present it in the other language. The strategies used by the interpreter and the factors that influence them can be specifically linguistic or non-linguistic and are constantly interwoven during the reception and production of the text. The non-linguistic factors that influence SI are time, limited memory capacity and split attention. The linguistic factor is the syntax of the language pair (Riccardi, 1995, pp. 172-173).

In addition to linguistic and non-linguistic factors and strategies, there is a third aspect that influences the performance of an interpretation referred to as *schemas*, i.e., stable structures for representing general concepts stored in memory (Riccardi, 1995, pp. 172-173); it is the active organization of past experiences. Schemas that are activated before and during the interpretation process are essential for understanding and anticipating the text and for the correct transmission of information. The schema that is activated has to do with the environment in which the session takes place, the topic, the speaker, the nature of the text, etc. The interpreter's individual knowledge leads to the activation of different schemas; for this reason, interpreting performances vary and can have different levels of superficial and deep structure and be more or less creative. During interpreting, not only the schemas common to all interpreters are activated, but also individual schemas reflecting the individual knowledge and experience of each interpreter (Riccardi, 1995, pp. 173-174).

Once the schemas are activated, the interpreter starts to work and uses the acquired strategies flexibly. Depending on the difficulties, two interacting strategies are used: the *skill-based strategy* and the *knowledge-based strategy* (Reason, 1990, p. 43, *apud* Riccardi, 1995, p. 174). The former is governed by patterns of storing automatic responses, which are parts of an interpretation that can be developed routinely (greeting, closing, thanking, etc., and normal or unmarked sentence structures). These are automatic strategies. The *knowledge-based strategy* is applied in new situations where the way of acting has to be decided by conscious analytical processes and stored knowledge. At this level, information processing (language comprehension and production) is something controlled and conscious, requiring much more effort. Some intentionally learned tasks appear to become automated with prolonged practice (Parkin, 1990). Practice, however, does not transform explicit knowledge into tacit competence. By practice, on the other hand, we do not mean rule-based practice but situation-based practice in which the rule is applied (Paradis, 1994, p. 404, *apud* Gran, 1995, p. 158).

3. Simultaneous Interpreting Training

One of the most characteristic features of SI is the need to make decisions quickly, at the same speed as the speaker, and adopt them without wasting time to consult different sources. And it is precisely this feature that should characterize didactic interpretation models. The goal is to create a model that is able to develop the competences already mentioned, that is clear and easy to understand, and that focuses on certain aspects that can be directly observed (Alonso Bacigalupe, 2001, pp. 6-21). The problem, however, is that in interpretation, what is applicable in a concrete schema may not be applicable in the schema of the expert's subsequent work. Perhaps the most important thing in the training of future interpreters is to teach them to maintain a psychological disposition that will enable

them to overcome the difficulties associated with the work that may arise at any time. Alonso Bacigalupe (2001, pp. 22-24) considers that we must teach future interpreters to take risks, use common sense, trust themselves, control the situation, not get attached to possible problems, focus on the rest of the speech, and make decisions quickly.

3.1 Out-of-Booth Exercises in SI

Although some people believe that interpreting is best learned just through interpretation, this is not the case, because mistakes eventually become entrenched through repetition and are much more difficult to eliminate (Kornakov, 2003, p. 163). This reasoning is also shared by the International Association of Conference Interpreters (2019), which specifies that one should not learn to interpret on one's own because it can be counterproductive.

Morais & Esqueda (2019) highlight the belief observed by the author that many students think it is necessary to have a special gift for simultaneous interpreting. In this vein, they conducted a study on the importance of domain knowledge (declarative and procedural) in SI training and concluded that those students who receive training before entering the booth are better able to separate main ideas from secondary ideas and make fewer mistakes. Apart from exercises, there are tools that can also lead to an improvement in the SI learning process, such as the pedagogical contract, the reflective diary and the student portfolio (Nieto García, 2012, 2019). The results obtained in a study carried out during three academic years show a better performance by students who used these didactic tools compared to those who did not.

Torres Díaz (2000b, pp. 47-64), Darías & Pérez-Luzardo (2003), Lambert (1992, p. 266), Van Besien (1999, p. 250), Vázquez y del Árbol (2005), Mahmoodzadeh & Mousavi Razavi (2014), Li (2015), Carsten (2017), and the Knowledge Centre on Interpretation of the European Commission (2021) present different out-of-booth exercises that can be carry out during the first lessons and which, regularly practiced, lead to a better performance. And these exercises, due to their relevance and appropriateness, could also be used as part of a pedagogical model for teaching large SI interpreting classes, as presented by Mohammed (2020) with full satisfaction of the trainees.

We agree on the classification of these out-of-booth exercises presented by Torres Díaz (2005bis, p. 14):

a) exercises focused on the essence and characteristics of the process (clozing, shadowing, time lag, translating from the page, anticipation and improvisation).

b) exercises subordinate to the process and related to the type of discourse and context (exercises with proper names, countries and numbers).

c) exercises related to the variants of simultaneous interpreting (from-sheet or text and relay interpreting).

For the purpose of our research, we will focus on discourse analysis, time lag, clozing, anticipation and improvisation.

3.1.1. Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis consists of an examination of the syntactic and semantic structure of the text. In the case of SI, the interpreter must not change the order in which the information is presented. Therefore, Sánchez Adam & Collados Aís (1997, pp. 28-29) advise to focus first on the intratextual analysis in order to be able to anticipate the speech acts and, therefore, the argumentative chain of the text, and to determine the degree of specialization of the text.

This intralinguistic analysis should focus on the macrostructure or cognitive organization of the text, which allows us to understand the discourse in order to follow a logical thread of argumentation without needing a deep understanding of the message (Sánchez Adam & Collados Aís, 1997, p. 29). In this sense, interpreters should pay attention to the grammatical cohesion and the lexical cohesion of the speech or text (Lin, 2019) since some omissions can go unnoticed if cohesion is maintained during the interpretation.

Students can undertake discourse analysis by analyzing the key information and expressing it with a small number of words. Alternatively, students could be asked to do an analysis of the discourse they heard in order to make a summary and a translation. Depending on the length of the text in question and the content, the analysis can be used to ask students to create a micro-summary that expresses the content in just one idea. Another option for discourse analysis is to rephrase the text by omitting the expressions used in the original discourse.

3.1.2. Time Lag

The purpose of this exercise is to get students used to retaining a certain amount of information that is released only after they have received new information. In this way, students hear a sentence that they do not have to reproduce until they hear the next sentence, in which case there is a gap of one sentence compared to the original speech. The time lag exercise also has the purpose that students do not take advantage of the speaker's natural pauses to interpret the message, so it is a good exercise to train the interpreters' fluency (Torres Díaz, 2005bis, p. 16).

3.1.3. Clozing

In clozing, when done in written form, students are presented with texts in which words, groups of words or whole sentences are missing, with the aim of having them complete the text by applying logic, grammar or context. For IS training, this exercise can also be done orally, with various words omitted that can be deduced from the grammar or context of the sentence, putting the interpreter in a situation that can be similar to reality, since there are times when some words are lost or not understood and yet can be deduced from the context (Torres Díaz, 2005bis, p. 15). Timarová & Ungoed-Thomas (2009, p. 230) propose an exercise of clozing in which trainees have to replace some personal information of the speaker with information about themselves. Likewise, Pöchhacker (2011) created the SynCloze exercise, in which students must not only fill in the gaps, but also give as many synonyms as possible of the words or ideas missing.

3.1.4. Anticipation

Anticipation consists of the interpreter presenting parts of the speech before the speaker has completed them semantically or syntactically (Van Besien, 1999, p. 250). Also known as *prediction*, it was not considered as an essential part of the first interpreting process models (Amos & Pickering, 2020, p. 707) but nowadays it is considered to be an important skill and different studies have been conducted to explore the possibilities of teaching anticipation (Seeber, 2001, Chmiel, 2021).

Anticipation exercises serve primarily to teach the student to apply common sense, which is fundamental to interpreting, as Alonso Bacigalupe (2001, pp. 22-24) noted. For Chernov (2004, *apud* Iglesias Fernández 2007, p. 19), the interpreter's preparation and documentation, together with the semantic redundancies of oral messages, allow for an absolutely necessary anticipation to carry out the interpreting process. And this necessity is further exacerbated when working with pairs of languages with an asymmetrical structure (Li, 2015).

Anticipation can be trained with oral clozing (Torres Díaz, 2005bis, pp. 17-18).

3.1.5. Improvisation

Vázquez y del Árbol (2005) believes that "the false debate" would be a good exercise to work on intuition and improvisation. It consists in choosing a random and controversial topic and asking students to act as if they were a certain politician, journalist, writer, etc. After a few minutes of preparation, the debate begins. In some cases, the trainer could give some directions to achieve the desired objective (Fernández Pérez, 2015).

4. Methodology

Out-of-booth exercises are not always well received by SI students, as they fever for working in the booth and tend to think that interpreting can be learned by interpreting alone. For this reason, we designed a research project whose objective was to collect the perceptions of students before faced with out-of-booth exercises and to verify if these perceptions were maintained after these exercises. To do that, we used a quantitative-qualitative methodology, with the help of different surveys that offered quantitate as well as qualitative data. Our hypothesis was that confronted with proper tailored exercises students would change their perceptions and attitude towards these out-of-booth exercises.

4.1. Subjects

In order to carry out our study, we chose two different groups in two different universities with two different language combinations but with many characteristics in common. Below is a profile of both groups:

Group 1: Universidad Europea de Madrid
Course: Simultaneous Interpreting (English-Spanish)
Course description: 4th year compulsory subject of the BA Translation and Interpreting of the Universidad Europea de Madrid. For students, it is the first subject of simultaneous interpreting they take, and it is no taught simultaneously with any other SI subject.
Subjects: 5 women and 4 men (ages 21-24). For all of them (100%) Spanish was their mother tongue, all of them (100%) had English as their B language, German was the C language of 44.44% of the students and

French was the C language of 66.66%. In addition, 33.33% had previously studied subjects related to public speaking.

Group 2: Universidad Complutense de Madrid

Course: Simultaneous Interpreting B2-A (German-Spanish)

Course description: 4th year compulsory subject of the interpreting program of the BA Translation and Interpreting of the Universidad Complutense de Madrid. For students, it is the first subject of simultaneous interpreting they take, and it is taught simultaneously with Simultaneous Interpreting B1-A (English).

Subjects: 9 women and 1 man (ages 21-23). For 90% of them Spanish was their mother tongue, 80% had English as their B language and German was the C language of 70%. 30% had previously studied subjects related to public speaking.

4.2. Experience Development

In order to collect first perceptions of students regarding SI and SI training, we handed both groups an open survey. In Group 1, 66.67% would have chosen the subject if it had not been compulsory. Among the most frequently mentioned difficulties, 33.33% pointed to the required level of source language and 66.67% cited the interpreting technique. When asked if the ideal interpreter should be a bilingual person, 77.8 % answered no and 22.2% answered yes. According to their answers, the necessary characteristics of a good interpreter included analysis and memory, attention span, quick decision making, improvisation, and knowledge of the work environment. When asked if continuous practice in the booth was the best way to learn interpreting, 100% answered yes.

In Group 2, 70% would have chosen the subject if it had not been compulsory. Among the most frequently mentioned difficulties, 80% pointed to the required level of source language and 20% cited the interpreting technique. When asked if the ideal interpreter should be a bilingual person, 80% answered no and 20% answered yes. According to their answers, the necessary features of a good interpreter included curiosity, speed, attention span, analysis and memory, good expression, decision making, improvisation, and knowledge of the work environment. When asked if continuous practice in the booth was the best way to learn interpreting, 90 % answered yes.

Once the questionnaire was completed, we explained to the students our intention to dedicate some sessions to presenting and performing exercises outside the booth. Thus, once the different exercises and their practical usefulness had been explained theoretically, we went on to work on speech analysis, time lag, clozing, anticipation and improvisation. We wanted students to focus on three parameters after the conclusion of the different exercises: 1) difficulty level, 2) main difficulty to perform the exercise, and 3) the perceived usefulness once completed. To do so, they were asked to anonymously rate each parameter from 1 to 10, with 1 being the lowest and 10 being the highest score.

4.2.3. Ratings of the Out-of-Booth Exercises Presented

The information below shows the scores given by students in Group 1 for the different parameters:

Table 1: Ratings of discourse analysis exercises in Group 1

Exercise 1: Discourse analysis	
Rephrasing after sentences	Rephrasing after paragraphs
Difficulty level: 5.3	Difficulty level: 6.8
Main difficulty: Memory	Main difficulty: Memory
Usefulness: 7.17	Usefulness: 9

Table 2: Ratings of time lag exercises in Group 1

Exercise 2: Time lag	
Time lag in Spanish	Time lag in English
Difficulty level: 7	Difficulty level: 7.2
Main difficulty: Memory	Main difficulty: Memory
Usefulness: 9.1	Usefulness: 9.4

Table 3: Ratings of clozing and anticipation exercises in Group 1

Exercise 3: Clozing – Anticipation	
Clozing in Spanish	Clozing in English
Difficulty level: 4.1	Difficulty level: 8.2
Main difficulty: Speed	Main difficulty: Language command
Usefulness: 8.8	Usefulness: 7.9

Table 4: Ratings of the improvisation exercises in Group 1

Exercise 4: Improvisation
Difficulty level: 3.1
Main difficulty: Speed
Usefulness: 5.8

Figure 1 shows the relationship between the difficulty level and the usefulness of the exercises according to the perceptions of Group 1:
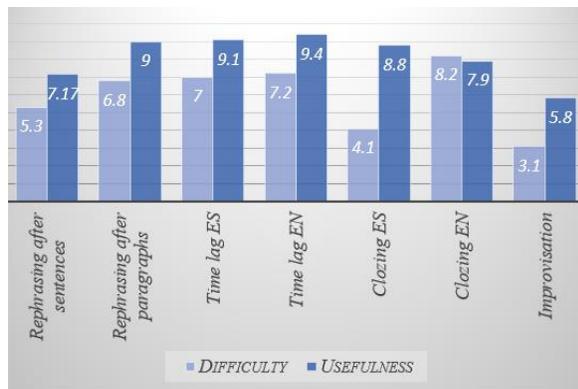
Figure 1: Difficulty level vs usefulness according to Group 1

The following are the results obtained according to the perceptions of Group 2:

Table 5: Ratings of discourse analysis exercises in Group 2

Exercise 1: Discourse analysis	
Rephrasing after sentences	Rephrasing after paragraphs
Difficulty level: 6.05	Difficulty level: 5.95
Main difficulty: Memory	Main difficulty: Memory
Usefulness: 8.33	Usefulness: 8.2

Table 6: Ratings of time lag exercises in Group 2

Exercise 2: Time lag	
Time lag in Spanish	Time lag in German
Difficulty level: 8.4	Difficulty level: 7.17
Main difficulty: Memory	Main difficulty: Memory
Usefulness: 9.33	Usefulness: 9

Table 7: Ratings of clozing and anticipation exercises in Group 2

Exercise 3: Clozing – Anticipation	
Clozing in Spanish	Clozing in German
Difficulty level: 3.71	Difficulty level: 8.57
Main difficulty: Speed	Main difficulty: Language command
Usefulness: 7	Usefulness: 8.2

Table 8: Ratings of the improvisation exercises in Group 2

Exercise 4: Improvisation
Difficulty level: 3.28
Main difficulty: Speed
Usefulness: 6.16

Figure 2 shows the relationship between the difficulty level and the usefulness of the exercises according to the perceptions of Group 2:
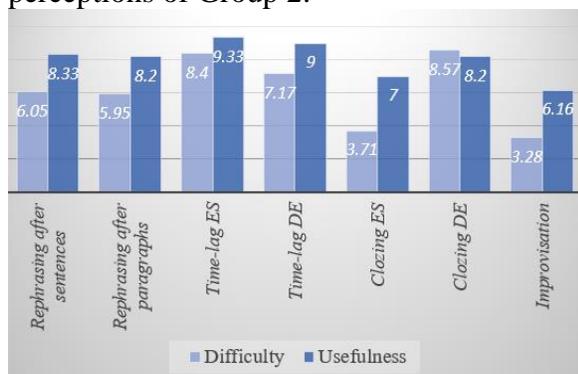

Figure 2: Difficulty level vs usefulness according to Group 2

4.2.3. Final Perceptions

After the experience, students in both groups were asked to fill out the original questionnaires again. In this case, the results varied because after completing the exercises, 100% of the respondents in Group 1 did not consider continuous practice in the booth as the best way to learn SI and 100% indicated that out-of-booth exercises would help them improve performance. In the case of Group 2, 83% of the respondents did not think that continuous practice in the booth was the best way to learn SI. 100% stated that out-of-booth exercises would help them improve performance.

5. Analysis of the Results

With the data from both groups compiled, we can see that the pattern of ratings is very similar and that both groups report the same main difficulties in each of the exercises. For both groups, the exercise with the greatest difficulty turned out to be the clozing in each of the foreign languages. Interestingly, for Group 1, the second most difficult exercise was time lag from the foreign language followed by time lag in the native language. In the case of Group 2 the second most difficult exercise was time lag in the native language followed by time lag from the foreign language.

As for the usefulness in terms of improvement in IS, perceptions vary. While for Group 1, the most useful exercise was time lag from the foreign language, followed by time lag in the mother tongue and rephrasing after paragraphs, for Group 2 time lag in the mother tongue was the most useful exercise, followed by time lag from the foreign language and rephrasing after sentences.

In both groups, the exercise rated as the easiest and least useful was the improvisation exercise.

These results contradict our first expectation when designing the study. Taking into consideration that both subjects belong to the 4th year of the degree and students from both groups had attended several courses of language, translation and at least one course of consecutive interpreting, we did not expect clozing to represent such a difficulty in their target language, even though some students in Group 2 had mentioned the level of language command as an obstacle.

On the other hand, we assumed that time-lag exercises would be complex for them since it was their first SI course and one of the main difficulties and worries expressed by the trainees at the beginning of the study was the technique.

However, being present in the class when all these exercises took place, there was something alarming in the results of the exercises related to discourse analysis and improvisation and which students considered easy, and that is that the grammar, register and lexical choices considered appropriate by the trainees, were far from being acceptable. For these reasons, to make them aware of the need to improve their grammar, register and lexical choices, students were recommended to make a student portfolio with the recordings, transcriptions and analysis of their interpretations.

6. Conclusions

The objective of this research was to collect the perceptions of SI students before performing out-of-booth exercises and to verify if these perceptions were maintained after these exercises.

After the study was conducted, it could be verified that at the beginning of the experience the vast majority of students from both groups, with different language combinations, believed that they only needed to interpret in order to learn the discipline and improve their performance. However, after performing various out-of-booth exercises this perception changed.

Our initial hypothesis was that, confronted with proper tailored exercises, students would change their perceptions and attitude towards these out-of-booth exercises and in this regard, these exercises made students change their minds and 100% of respondents in Group 1 and 82% in Group 2 did not think that continuous practice in the booth was the best way to learn SI. 100% of students from both groups stated that out-of-booth exercises would help them improve performance.

Students from both groups asked to include out-of-booth exercises in their training. However, to our surprise, the grammar, lexical choices and register considered appropriate by trainees while performing the exercises was well below what is expected for students in their last year. For this reason, a student portfolio was suggested.

We believe that another research line for the future would be to extrapolate these out-of-booth exercises to other language combinations to see if the language pair is important in defining the perceived difficulty and the usefulness of the different exercises.

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