

Training Conference Interpreters: an experiential approach to teaching and learning

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Introduction

This paper explores the role of experiential learning in courses for conference interpreters at London Metropolitan University. It demonstrates how experiential learning allows a desirable approach to the successful learning experience of students and prepares them to transfer their skills when working as professionals, while building closer links with the profession.

In 2004 London Metropolitan University decided to invest in interpreting courses, and built a new suite to accommodate a new Master's programme in this field, covering public service and remote interpreting as well as conference interpreting. In a professional area like interpreting, for courses to recruit and gain credibility, it is essential to assess and understand the needs of the sector so that education and training responds to clients' needs and in return helps them leap forward and achieve new goals. Training is a transitional stage that allows a person or an organisation to move forward, and in this sense it can easily be compared to a 'relay process'.

The profile of students joining our postgraduate studies in interpreting is continuously changing. However, most seem to come from these main categories:

- Professional interpreters with other specialisations
- Qualified translators
- Language specialists
- Mature multilingual students with a specialisation

The language combinations vary, depending on the needs of the market. With the new European member states, we have seen an increase in the interest in Eastern European languages. Following other economic changes, Chinese is currently very popular as well as Turkish. Compared to other interpreting programmes, our language pathways are more varied, as our key approach is to cater for the demands of the existing market.

The challenge of professional training

The complex and multifaceted profession of the conference interpreter is challenging and constantly requires updating one's skills and knowledge.

Conference interpreters depend on linguistic skills (active and passive languages classified as A, B and C) and continuously work on new linguistic acquisitions. They also need excellent communication skills to transfer both verbal and non verbal messages in what can be described as challenging environments, such as key meetings, technical conferences, negotiations at ministerial levels, etc. The interpreting process requires fast analytical listening skills to identify key ideas, anticipate what comes next and reformulate in such a way that end users feel they are communicating in the same language.

Conference interpreters could also be described as cultural experts, understanding all parties involved during an assignment, besides being facilitators, aware of the official and non-official agenda of sensitive meetings. Interpreters need to possess many talents to perform their tasks well; they have to be good speakers, be able to focus and relax, show a high level of energy, and be well organised to manage a constantly changing timetable, booking travel arrangements, since conferences take place everywhere in the world. They also perform in a technical environment and need to understand the equipment they work with. Working with colleagues in the confined space of a booth can also require a certain amount of diplomacy. These combinations of tasks do not come naturally and require a high potential of concentration and focussing, as well as many hours of practice.

When looking at guidelines from AICC (International Association of Conference Interpreters), we all seem to agree that as a result of the skills mentioned above, a postgraduate approach is the only way forward. Students need excellent linguistic abilities at the beginning of the course, as well as the necessary general knowledge of the world around them. Analytical thinking is essential for the acquisition of new skills as well as the necessity to reflect on one's own performance. The AICC also recommends that courses

should be designed, directed and taught by practicing conference interpreters, since they provide not only knowledge but also know-how. The interpreters' experience and reputation provide the essential interface between training and the profession. (AICC, 2004)

Contrary to prevalent attitudes in the profession, this 'know-how' requires more than familiarity with the acquisition of interpreting skills and with theory about that process (e.g. Giles, 1990; Schjoldager, 1995). It also requires an interest in teaching methodologies for interpreting. During the ITI Edinburgh conference in 1998, a student said it was easier to satisfy a client than to satisfy a teacher. That approach is old fashioned and unfair and can be devastating for students. As a result, qualified

interpreters surviving the process of traditional training are left fragile and vulnerable, with very often a defensive approach to feedback. Strong teaching skills are thus vital to design, teach and monitor an interpreting training programme.

We believe that the AICC model is useful and we have implemented some key elements, such as the working environment (our new interpreting suite includes 6 booths that comply with AICC quality standards), a strict entry selection at the beginning of the course, language combinations offered that reflect the market requirements, a practical focus on consecutive and simultaneous interpreting, and finally the training on theory and the code of practice. But we have also gone further and adjusted our approach to offer a flexible professional outcome for students, a standard higher education assessment system and additional provision for the continuous professional development of interpreters.

Our teaching approach is evolutive, entailing a continuous cyclic process with practice and feedback, reflection and theoretical suppositions from practice, and inclusion of new suppositions in further practice followed again by feedback.

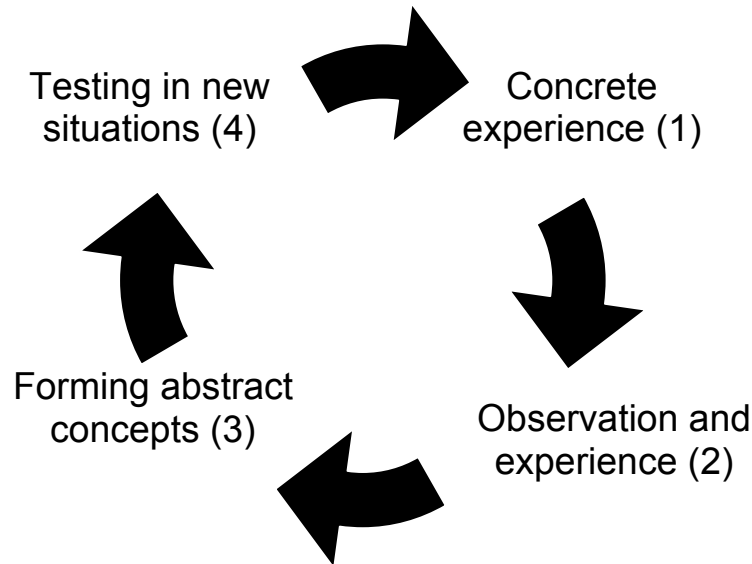
In pedagogical terms, our courses require a teaching model that combines a practical approach, observation, reflection, and a close relationship between training and work experience. Experiential learning provides such an approach – for the tutors as much as the students!

Experiential learning model

There are different notions of experiential learning (see Boud *et al.*, 1985). One approach emphasises direct participation in real-life experiences, with 'learning undertaken by students who are given a chance to acquire and apply knowledge, skills, in a relevant setting' (Brookfield, 1983:16). This involves 'a direct encounter with the phenomena being studied rather than merely thinking about the encounter, or only considering doing something about it' (*ibid.*, citing Borzak, 1981).

The encounter with experience is at the heart of Kolb's model of the experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 1984). It defines a cyclical pattern starting with the student's concrete experience, followed by a reflection task which would create a second experience (see figure below). From this results an ability to form abstract concepts that can then be tested in new situations.

Kolb's model differs from rationalist and other cognitive theories of learning which mainly concentrate on knowledge acquisition, which is then be used by students to practice new skills. It also differs from behavioural learning theories that 'deny any role for consciousness and subjective experience in the learning process' (*ibid.*).



The experiential learning model was not promoted as a third alternative to the rationalist or behavioural learning theories. It is designed to suggest a ‘holistic integrative perspective on learning’ that combines experience, perception, cognition, and behaviour (*ibid.*).

The experiential learning element in our interpreting programme at London Metropolitan University can be illustrated in terms of the four phases of the Kolb cycle.

Concrete experience

First of all, our team of over 20 tutors are all practising interpreters in the field of the topics taught (conference interpreting, public service interpreting, and remote interpreting). Though it can be challenging in terms of staffing, we insist that this experience is essential in providing students a direct window on the outside world of interpreting, i.e. bringing a closer link between training and professional experience.

The students are exposed to mock situations that are all based on real-life experience. We have developed a ‘hands on approach’ with a wide selection of exercises that all provide correspond with real-life situations. All our scripts reflect the use of skills in the professional sector. For example, consecutive interpreting is illustrated by the statement-taking exercise for the police, or telephone interpreting with real situations such as domestic violence scripts, accident and emergency scenario etc. We always connect the use of a new skill to the way it will be applied in a real life situation.

Our placement project is also ideal for introducing students to a real-life setting. Our module on professional development involves the visit of a representative of each interpreting professional organisation (Institute of Linguists, Institute of Translation and Interpreting, National Register of Public Service Interpreters,

Association Internationale des Interprètes de Conférence), consultancy on employability, and a wide range of case studies allowing reflection and an in-depth understanding of the code of practice and etiquette.

Observation and experience

Peer assessment, self assessment, shadowing of interpreters at work, reflective assignments for each modules, and three assignments based on interpreting recordings, with analysis of strategies and conclusions to apply for subsequent assignments, offer quite a range of opportunities allowing lecturers to reinforce the key role of observation, analysis and reflection.

Case studies (mainly in the module on the interpreter's professional context) also provide a vehicle for reflective learning. On this point, Kreber (2001) describes the relevance of learning experientially through case studies. She comes to the conclusion that there are ways of engaging students in all phases of Kolb's experiential learning cycle when using case studies in conjunction with a problem solving model, as long as experiences can be transformed into knowledge.

Forming abstract concepts

From their experience, students are invited to discover the theories from researchers. Their own conclusions, reinforced by the exchange of ideas with their interpreting tutors are also an excellent opportunity to learn how to form the abstract concepts that will feed the progress of their new experience.

Testing in new situations

Testing in new situations has been made possible thanks to a cyclic approach, with repetitive mock conferences and feedback, and opportunity to apply knowledge in real situations, such as the placement element. Our projects create opportunities to practice conference interpreting using dummy booths at the European Commission, as well as connecting the university with video links with the Olympic committee in view of the preparation for the 2012 Olympic Games.

Conclusion

In his review of experiential learning in higher education, Cantor (1995) stresses the renewed academic interest in this approach, which he describes as a necessary and vital element of the university curriculum. He suggests that the experiential learning programmes with educational placements, practical experiences, and classroom-based hands-on exercises are ideal for teaching programmes aimed at education, health careers, or social work. He reveals that literature research shows that students and the community have been brought closer, hence allowing students an easier transfer of their knowledge and skills to professional practice. The same applies to the field of professional interpreting, where experiential learning offers an ideal model. Learning cannot only be based on the delivery of a set programme and

theories; personal contribution through reflection on practical experience is essential.

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Danielle D'Hayer is the Course Leader for the MA programme in Interpreting at London Metropolitan University. For the last 19 years she has taught in various settings, ranging from the commercial market and secondary education to further education and then higher education. She worked as an in-house interpreter for some years and has been involved in training public service and conference interpreters for nearly a decade.

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