

Authentic and Valid Assessment: assessing the performance of Public Service Interpreters

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Introduction

The study of assessment practices in Interpreting provides a welcome opportunity to consider issues relating to assessment of practical performance, and can help us explore the implications of trying to ensure that assessment adheres to professional standards.

Interpreters perform an important bridging function in many communication settings by producing a *target speech* in a language which is different from that of the original *source speech*. Unlike in translation – which involves the production of written texts – the product of interpreting work necessarily consists of audio material which must be produced during an event which is both time-defined and situation-defined. Consequently, assessment of interpreting work relies mainly on recording and evaluating practical performances. More ‘traditional’ methods of assessment such as written coursework or written tests, whilst relevant, are unlikely to play a primary role.

Interpreting is also a discipline which retains a strong vocational element. Despite a recent trend to move away from simple professional training and adopt a broader educational approach, the primary purpose of interpreting courses – at least in the perception of the students, who are arguably their most important stakeholders – seems to be to prepare learners for a future of professional practice. Indeed, that expectation is formalised within institutional assessment policy. London Metropolitan University’s Assessment Framework states that “assessment practice (including aims, methods, marking and feedback) should be informed by recommendations made by appropriate external bodies” (London Metropolitan University 2009 p.7). This expected and prescribed alignment between pedagogical and professional practice provides teachers and learners with both challenges and opportunities.

It is those challenges and opportunities which are explored in this paper.

Assessment in Interpreting Studies: issues and perspectives

Although Interpreting Studies is a rather young academic discipline, the amount of subject literature devoted to pedagogical matters is considerable, perhaps as a result of the fact that, within a relatively small community of practitioners, many will themselves be trainers and researchers. Several authors (e.g. Gile 2001, Pöchhacker 2001) address assessment issues in their work and Sawyer (2004) provides perhaps the most comprehensive review of recent assessment practices in Interpreting. However, no major works have been devoted entirely to assessment and therefore, perhaps inevitably, discussions of assessment are based on the same perspectives and positions which have characterised the main approaches to Interpreting pedagogy in general.

Historically, there have been two main schools of Interpreting pedagogy. One has been based on a humanistic, holistic approach and sees interpreting as essentially a semantic pursuit and focuses its attention on the interpreter's work in understanding and creating *meaning* using simple linguistic processes which are conceptualised as quasi-automatic. The second one, based on multidisciplinary work drawing mainly on psycholinguistics and cognitive studies, argues for a more scientific approach, where the various cognitive processes involved in a complex activity can be studied – and perhaps, by implication, taught - separately.

Pöchhacker (2004) provides an excellent example of an issue which illustrates the contrast in the two approaches: the use of *shadowing*. Shadowing is a technique which consists of students repeating the source speech in the same language: the source speech is quite simply re-uttered, sometimes with a minimal delay or sometimes with a more considerable delay which allows for comprehension and analysis to occur at phrasal, rather than simply phonological level. Proponents of the holistic approach reject it as a task which is intrinsically and fundamentally different from interpreting, as it does not involve any interlingual transfer of meaning. This view already points, implicitly, to a notion that authenticity is important and I will return to this notion later. Supporters of the 'scientific' approach instead advocate the use of shadowing, on the grounds that it is a useful training tool in developing the split-attention skills which are so important to the cognitive processes involved in providing simultaneous interpreting.

An analogous contrast can be seen in relation to assessment approaches and techniques. The prevalent method of assessing student interpreters is a practical exam in which the student performs an actual interpreting task and is judged mainly or exclusively on the basis of the resulting product, i.e. the target speech. Such a practice reflects the underlying assumptions of the holistic approach and, perhaps unsurprisingly in the case of a vocational discipline, the standard methods used in the accreditation of professionals. Sawyer (2001, quoted in Pöchhacker 2004, p. 188) concludes that 'professional judgement prevails over systematic approaches'.

Nevertheless, methods that reflect the scientific approach are sometimes used, typically in entrance tests.

Even if the holistic practical exam is the mainstay of summative assessment practices, a scientific approach could be used in formative assessment. Gile (2001, p.392) makes that distinction explicitly:

“...assessment during training differs from professional assessment because of its formative purpose and because of the importance it assigns to the underlying processes, rather than simply to the product...” [Author’s translation & emphasis – Ed.].

At the same time, Gile (2001) accepts the premise that summative assessment should reflect professional accreditation practices on the grounds that, at the end of the course, no further development is possible; the assumption is that the newly-minted graduate ought to be immediately ready for professional practice. A perhaps more realistic and pragmatic synthesis is offered by Fabbro & Gran (1997, quoted in Riccardi 2002, p. 117): “we should always consider the actual level at which our students are working, rather than think in terms of the ideal level we wish them to attain”.

The prevalence of product-orientated assessment relying on a final practical exam inevitably raises an issue which must be familiar to anyone who has to grapple with the challenges of assessing practical performance, namely the degree to which any performance, taken in isolation, can be considered representative of an individual’s overall competence. As Pickford and Brown (2006, p. 3) ask, with crystalline clarity, “if we want to assess capability, is it enough to assess it only once?” In trying to provide a solution to this problem, some authors (e.g. Pöchhacker 2004) have suggested the use of Personal Development Portfolios (PDPs), which can shed light on some competencies which would not be validly assessed using a practical exam. Sawyer (2004, p. 126) agrees, stating that PDPs “directly address [...] criticism often levelled at interpreter assessment: that one-shot testing is shallow”. Despite the widespread use of PDPs in the educational community, however, there is anecdotal evidence that the community of practitioners, and the professional bodies which represent it, are still sceptical about - or indeed opposed to - the use of PDPs, as they perceive them to be irrelevant to authentic interpreting tasks. This tension between educational validity and professional credibility is perhaps the most important aspect of the present discussion, and I will return to it in the following sections.

The specific domain of Public Service Interpreting

Public Service Interpreting (PSI) is the professional domain of interpreters who work for services such as the courts, the police, immigration agencies, the health service and local authorities. It is a designation which is specific to the UK, as in most other

English-speaking countries it is generally known as 'Community Interpreting'. Historically, it has often been played the part of the poor relation to the more established discipline of Conference Interpreting, both from a professional and from an academic and pedagogical point of view. In professional terms, earning prospects remain stubbornly disappointing, which results in a predictable reliance on amateur interpreters (despite inspiring examples of good practice, typically from Australia). In academic and pedagogical terms, trainers and researchers often work within theoretical frameworks which have been devised for Conference Interpreting, and these are sometimes indiscriminately applied to all kinds of interpreting tasks, regardless of their specific features.

Consequently, the lion's share of the literature on interpreting assessment focuses on simultaneous interpreting as practised by conference interpreters, i.e. in a soundproof booth using dedicated audio technology and interpreting mono-directionally between active speakers and passive listeners. In the case of PSI, the interpreter is more visible and interprets between two interlocutors who are both active (e.g. in the case of a doctor's consultation with a patient). Issues of turn-taking, which are all but irrelevant to simultaneous conference interpreting, are of fundamental importance to PSI. PSI interpreters also use a form of simultaneous interpreting (called 'whispered interpreting') during long stretches when the communication is mono-directional (e.g. in a court hearing, when the defendant who needs the interpretation plays no active part in the proceedings and simply needs to understand what other people in the courtroom are saying). The fact that whispered interpreting is provided without the support of dedicated technology entails some specific skills on the part of the interpreter (e.g. knowing how to position oneself at an optimal distance from the listener, using the voice at the right volume without interfering with the essential process of hearing and understanding the source speech) which are, again, very important in PSI but largely irrelevant to conference interpreting. Furthermore, the interpreter's visibility entails yet another set of skills relating to body language and general non-verbal communication, as well as conversational management. A PSI interpreter, for example, will often have to be proactive in interrupting an interlocutor who produces a lengthy turn.

When it comes to assessing PSI students, it seems therefore important to devise authentic and valid assessment tasks. That cannot be achieved simply on the basis of an analysis of the target speech. As Pöchhacker (2001, p.421) puts it:

"the concept of quality cannot be pinned down to some linguistic substrate but must be viewed also at the level of communicative effect and impact on the interaction within particular situational and institutional constraints".

Insofar as the debate between holistic and scientific approaches to assessment can be construed as a typical dichotomy between focus on product or on process, in a sense it may be argued that in PSI the process is the product.

At a basic level, the necessity to assess the broader communicative performance of a PSI student immediately forces us to consider a practical assessment issue, namely the need for video recordings as well as audio. Lee (2008, p.170) points out that “eye-contact and posture are important public speaking skills, but such kinesic information is not available in audio-taped performance”. Whilst the move to video is likely to elicit universal approval, it poses important questions relating to assessment feasibility which have significant implications for the overall work of institutions engaged in interpreter training, not least as far as resources are concerned.

Authenticity and alignment with professional practice

The situational features of PSI outlined above lead us to consider the question of the authenticity of assessment task.. Authenticity is a notion which has a long pedigree. Chen (2009) traces its origins to the 1970s emphasis on ‘communicative methodology’ in Second Language Acquisition. Bachman and Palmer (1996, p.23) define authenticity as ‘the degree of correspondence of the characteristics of a given language test task to the features of a TLU [*target language use*]’. However, as we have seen, there is more to interpreting than language use.

The perspective of situated cognition also seems highly relevant to assessing practical performance, as in the case of interpreting. It would therefore appear reasonable to make every effort to replicate professional situations (within the understandable feasibility constraints evoked above). On the other hand *manufactured experiences*, which may prove to be more useful and appropriate than actual authentic experiences (Sawyer, 2004, p.83). They are also, arguably, more valid in assessment terms since:

“assessment should be stretching for students, allowing each to maximise potential and enabling tutors to differentiate between different standards of achievement fairly and transparently” (Pickford and Brown, 2006, p.124)

Since the reality of interpreting work often involves dealing with repetitive, unchallenging materials for long periods of time, often interspersed with very challenging sections, it may therefore be just as appropriate to use such manufactured experiences in order to test the achievement of particular learning outcomes.

Implications

The tension between pedagogical objectives, professional practices and practical limitations is a constant feature this work, both in teaching Interpreting in general and in the specific case of assessment practice. That work is often challenging because a different set of materials is needed for each – different - language group of candidates, rather than just for each exam. Furthermore, the languages in question

often require external expertise, with predictable workload consequences in liaising with the HPLs who provide it.

The need to consider issues of alignment with professional practice must continue to be an important factor, however, that need must be reconciled with practical considerations which may not be apparent to professional bodies but are nevertheless very important to a university. For example, the National Occupational Standards in Interpreting produced by the National Centre for Languages (CILT 2006, p.5) prescribes simulated assignments in which “at least two people who do not speak or sign the same language are engaged in meaningful communication though the means of interpreting”. The staffing implications for our university of implementing that recommendation to the letter would be vast, and trying to do so would impinge on other, arguably more important competing objectives (such as the space needed to provide video, rather than just audio recordings, or the extra time made available for activities by assessing several candidates together rather than at different times).

Ultimately, however, any new practice born of experimentation should ideally be tested in a scientific way. As Sawyer (2004, p.95) puts it, “determining whether assessment practices and the decisions inferred from them are valid entails a process of evidence gathering”. However, the same process of evidence gathering can often be signally absent from the practice of professional bodies. Indeed, it seems reasonable to suggest that a university might be the ideal place to undertake it. Whilst it is therefore understandable that our assessment practice should be “informed by recommendations made by appropriate external bodies”, as prescribed by the University Assessment Framework (London Metropolitan University 2009 p.7) it also seems reasonable to see the sharing good practice as a two-way process.

Conclusion

The current state of assessment practice in the field of Interpreting Studies reflects the evolution of general pedagogical practice. The prevalent approach seems to be product-orientated and perhaps unduly constrained by established professional practices. By paying due attention to issues relating to process, authenticity and validity, it seems possible to capitalise on academic experience in other fields and work towards raising standards in Interpreting assessment, both in an educational and in a professional context.

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