

Training Interpreters: No Easy Task

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Abstract

This paper studies Haddad's model of training interpreters (2006) where the researcher underlines the importance of bolstering the confidence of the novice interpreter through adopting gradual training strategies which start at the first rung of the ladder with sight translation, and end at the highest rung with simultaneous interpretation. The middle rung is occupied by liaison and consecutive interpretation.

The main objective of the current research is to modify the abovementioned model by adopting some training stages (memory, sight translation & sight interpretation) from the screening instruments used to select applicants for the Graduate Diploma Programme at the University of Ottawa (Canada), appropriately locating them on the different rungs of the new ladder, specifying their aims, and suggesting the new model as a potential two-year diploma/MA programme for training interpreters at Syrian universities.

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1. Introduction

The demand for interpreters is growing dramatically worldwide. The increase in international contacts and in the number of international organizations, and the relatively sluggish development in the related fields of technology (e.g. translation machine) put interpreters and interpretation training programmes in the spotlight.

This increasing demand has pushed interpretation scholars to produce more pieces of research with hundreds of questions raised, and, more often than not, answered: what is the difference between translation and interpretation? (e.g. Mohammed 1986, al-Khuri 1992, Haddad 2002, Haddad 2004, Haddad 2006). What are the tasks of the interpretation instructor and those of the student interpreter? (e.g. Kornakov 2000). Should the novice interpreter be instructor-trained, self-trained, or both? (e.g. Kornakov 2000, Haddad 2006). How can interpretation instructors bolster students' confidence? (e.g. Haddad 2006). How should interpretation instructors improve their students' memories? (e.g. Kornakov 2000). What is note-taking? (e.g. Dam 2004), etc.

Since it is crucially important for any reader of the current study to be aware of the main differences between oral and written translation, and, by extension, of the sub-types that come under the former, a quick survey is made. This will be followed by the aim of the study and the relevant details.

Oral and written translation are the two main types distinguished by scholars (For more details, see Mohammed 1986, al-Khuri 1992, Haddad 2002, Haddad 2004, Haddad 2006). They are "...activities which involve communication, as such they can be defined as the transfer of a MESSAGE from one linguistic code to another." (Gentile 1991:345). Oral translation, i.e. Interpretation, "...is usually used to refer to the transfer of oral messages, either consecutively or simultaneously, and translating to the transfer of written messages." (Gentile 1991:346). The task of the interpreter is usually "...portrayed as one of "transcoding", a simple changing of one code... to another." (Angelelli 2000:80).

Petite (2005:27) argues that “Unlike translators of written texts who have some time to ‘polish’ their translation, interpreters need to perform ‘online’ and ‘on the spot’.”

On-sight translation, where translators are expected to immediately and orally render the contents of a written source text (Hatim & Mason 1997), lies half-way between translation and interpretation (Haddad 2006). Some scholars (e.g. Herbert 1952 in Agrifoglio 2004) locate it under simultaneous interpretation.

Three basic types of interpretation are distinguished: liaison, consecutive, and simultaneous (Hatim & Mason 1997). In liaison interpreting, interpreters are required to immediately translate “...each speaker’s contribution in a conversation, discussion or similar exchange between two or more individuals speaking different languages.” (Zahner 1990:297). The liaison interpreter functions as an intermediary in informal discussions, more formal interview/question-answer sessions, etc. (Hatim 1997, Hatim 1993). This type of interpretation involves working back and forth between two languages (Haddad 2006). The consecutive interpreter translates short utterances (Woodruff 2003), and usually takes notes of what is being said (Hatim & Mason 1997).

The simultaneous interpreter speaks simultaneously with the speaker of the original text. S/he receives a verbal text and immediately renders it verbally into the target language while listening at the same time to the incoming message (Liu, Schallert & Carroll 2004). In simultaneous interpreting (SI), complex mental processes are involved, and the time factor is of crucial importance (Yagi 1999).

Al-Salman & Al-Khanji (2002:608) argue that

“...the process of interpretation is a challenging task – a task that requires various types of both linguistic and non-linguistic skills: mastery of the active language, solid background of general knowledge, some personal qualities like the faculty of analysis and synthesis, the ability to intuit meaning, the capacity to adapt immediately to change in subject matter and different speakers and situations. Other qualities include the need to have good short

and long term memory, the ability to concentrate, a gift for public speaking, and physical endurance and good nerves.”

2. Aims of Research

In her book “Interpreting: Confidence-Building Strategies”, Haddad (2006) highlights the importance of bolstering the interpreter students’ confidence in order to help them handle the interpretation task that involves an exceptional degree of stress, and requires gradual, carefully-designed training programmes. She suggests three phases, progressing from the least up to the most complicated: the warm-up phase (sight translation), the intermediate phase (liaison and consecutive interpretation), and the advanced phase (simultaneous interpretation). It is the aim of this paper to

- 1) Modify Haddad’s model for training interpreters by incorporating some training stages from the Graduate Diploma Programme at the University of Ottawa/Canada into her model.
- 2) Locate the new stages appropriately in the new model.
- 3) Specify the objective of every stage in the new model.
- 4) Introduce the new model as a potential two-year diploma/MA programme for training interpreters at Syrian universities.

3. Haddad’s Confidence-Building Strategies

Haddad (2006) claims that lack of confidence is one of the graveyards of the student interpreter since it affects concentration and, hence, jeopardises her/his performance. Based on this belief, she suggests gradual confidence-building strategies to improve the students’ interpretation skills. The process is divided into three phases, progressing from the least up to the most complicated.

3.1. The Warm-Up Phase (WUP)

This phase is divided into three rungs where on-sight translation is used intensively as a warm-up technique. Haddad (2006:32) argues that her choice of on-sight translation is based on her belief that

“...its position in-between translation and interpreting, with all that this position entails (physical presence of source text, disappearance of interpreting equipment, etc.), makes the interpreter trainee, still stumbling on the first step of the interpreting ladder, feel more comfortable and confident than starting, say, with simultaneous interpreting.”

Rung 1 of the warm-up phase lays the cornerstone for Haddad's interpretation programme. In this rung, student interpreters are provided with both source and target texts and are guided to read them quickly (maximum 10 minutes for each set of source and target texts) and start sight translating aloud without looking at the target texts while translating.

In warm-up phase (rung 2), no translated texts are provided. As an alternative, student interpreters are allowed to use their dictionaries before sight translating aloud. Pre-translation reading time should not exceed 10 minutes for each text. Students are encouraged to depend on their memory by not writing any translated word on the paper. They are also advised to avoid dictionaries unless absolutely necessary since dictionary-use is time consuming.

In warm-up phase (rung 3), student interpreters are denied access to dictionaries. Before sight translating aloud, they are instructed to underline or highlight the main verb in every sentence, and to put parenthetical clauses between brackets. Eye-catching colours for underlining/highlighting and bracketing are strongly recommended, and reading time should not exceed 7 minutes.

3.2. The Intermediate Phase (IP)

The intermediate phase is divided into two stages: stage I, which deals with liaison interpreting, and stage II, which deals with consecutive interpreting.

In stage I, student interpreters are provided with interviews where the interviewers' and interviewees' contributions are produced in two different languages (English and Arabic). All the interviews are recorded at a normal speaking rate, with appropriate pauses for interpreting. Students are instructed to listen to every recorded segment and start liaison interpreting during the pause time.

In stage II, student interpreters are first provided with two versions of the same text accompanied by its translation. The first version (V1) is recorded in short segments, and the second (V2) in relatively longer segments. In both versions, the speaker speaks at a normal speaking rate. Students are guided to listen to a segment of version 1 and start consecutive interpreting. After they have completed all of the segments of version 1, they are guided to do the same with version 2. In both versions, they are guided to take notes where appropriate (dates, names, etc.). Once the interpreting process has been completed, they are asked to check how close/far their translation is to/from the translation provided. Students are later given a few texts on which to practice consecutive interpretation. All texts are recorded at a normal speaking rate, and are divided into short segments.

Haddad (2006:225) argues that "...note-taking is a very helpful technique. However, overuse of this technique can be distracting, particularly for interpreter trainees."

3.3 The Advanced Phase (AP)

The phase of simultaneous interpretation is the highest on the interpretation ladder. Haddad (2006) introduces five start-up, training experiments where a tape recorder and a blank cassette tape are required. Student interpreters are provided with a sample text with its translation. Both source and target texts are recorded at a normal speaking rate. In experiment 1, student interpreters are instructed to listen to the source

text through headphones and to start simultaneous interpreting from English into Arabic, without looking at the target text. Meanwhile, the tape recorder and the blank cassette tape should be used to record the students' interpreting process.

In experiment 2, student interpreters are instructed to listen to their voices on the cassette tape to check how close/far they are to/from the translation provided. In experiment 3, source and target texts swap positions. Students are instructed to do Arabic/English simultaneous interpreting, using the tape recorder and the cassette tape to record their interpreting process. In experiment 4, student interpreters are asked to listen to their voices on the cassette tape to check how close/far they are to/from the written translation. Experiment 5 encourages the teacher to heighten students' awareness of the interpreting difficulties they have encountered in the above four experiments by having a post-interpreting chat with them. Haddad (2006:298) argues that

“Recalling the difficulties and the problem-solving strategies they have adopted, even when those strategies are unfortunate, will help them on other interpreting occasions.”

Finally, student interpreters are provided with a selection of texts recorded at a normal speaking rate. They are asked to listen to them through headphones, start simultaneous interpreting, use the tape recorder and the cassette tape to record their interpreting process, and rewind the recorded cassette tape to listen to their translation and locate problematic areas. The interpretation instructors are asked to have a post-interpretation chat with their student interpreters following the interpretation of every text.

4. Graduate Diploma Programme at the University of Ottawa

Lambert (1991) discusses the screening instruments used to choose applicants for the Graduate Diploma Programme at the University of Ottawa where professional training in consecutive and simultaneous interpretation is provided. The selection exams include shadowing, cloze, sight translation/sight interpretation, memory test, and interview. It is important to mention at this early

stage that only memory test and sight translation/sight interpretation will be discussed here since they are directly relevant to the main argument of the current research.

Sight translation is divided into two types: stressful and unstressful. In the unstressful type, the candidate is given around ten minutes to read the text and prepare the vocabulary. In the stressful type, however, the candidate is denied the preparation time. S/he is first asked to sight translate from her/his B language into her/his A language (mother tongue), and then, translate the same text from her/his A language into her/his B language.

In sight interpretation, the message is presented both aurally and visually. The candidate is given 5-10 minutes to prepare a written text. Following the preparation time, s/he is asked to sight interpret the text while it is being read to her/him through headphones.

The Programme focuses on memory tests since it is important for the interpreter to remember as well as understand the message being conveyed. Two short text memory tests are selected from the English language, and two similar texts are designed by Lambert in French. All texts consist of around 65 words, and the memory test is based on Wechsler's model (1945).

Wechsler I (A to A) provides the candidates with a text in their mother tongue. They are asked to listen carefully and then recall as much as they can in the same language. No note-taking is allowed.

In Wechsler II (B to B), the retentive ability of the candidates in addition to their command of their B language are tested. The candidates in this case are presented with a text in their B language and are asked to recall as much as they can in the same language.

Wechsler III and IV test both the retentive memory and translation abilities of the candidates. In Wechsler III (B to A), the candidates are given a text in their B language and are instructed to recall as much as they can in their A language. In Wechsler IV

(A to B), the text is presented in their A language and they are asked to recall as much as they can in their B language.

5. A New Approach to Training Interpreters

As argued earlier, the main aim of this paper is to modify Haddad's model of training interpreters by incorporating some training stages from the screening instruments used to select applicants for the Graduate Diploma Programme at the University of Ottawa into her model. The first is the memory-test stage, which, for the purpose of the current research, will be called from now on the memory-training phase, and the second is related to stressful sight translation from language B into language A, stressful sight translation from language A into language B, and sight interpretation from B into A and from A into B. While the first stage appears as an independent phase in the new model, the sight translation/sight interpretation elements come under Haddad's warm-up phase.

5.1. The Memory-Training Phase

This phase precedes the warm-up phase. It is adopted to improve the novice's memory and prepare her/him for the coming phase. Depending on Wechsler (1945), short English and Arabic texts (about 65 words each) should be selected for memory-training purposes.

In step I, students should be provided with texts in Arabic (their mother language) and should be asked to listen attentively and recall as much as they can in Arabic.

In step II, students should be asked to listen attentively to English texts (their B language) and recall as much as they can in English. This improves their retentive ability as well as their command of language B.

In step III, students should be asked to listen carefully to English texts and to recall as much as they can in Arabic, while they should be asked in step IV to listen carefully to Arabic texts

and recall as much as they can in English. Both III and IV improve students' retentive memory and translation skills.

5.2. Sight Translation/Sight Interpretation

In light of the Graduate Diploma Programme at the University of Ottawa, the three rungs of Haddad's warm-up phase shall be labelled unstressful sight-translation since the novice interpreters are given preparation time to read the text and prepare the vocabulary. The stressful type, where the novice students are denied preparation time, shall be added to the new model, and shall be located under the warm-up phase (Rungs 4 & 5) (See diagram below). Rungs 6 & 7 shall be called unstressful sight-interpretation and shall also be placed under the warm-up phase in the new model (See diagram below).

In Rung 4, novice interpreters should be given texts to sight translate from English into Arabic. This Rung is supposed to be easier than the coming one since it is widely believed that translation from B into A is much more comfortable than from A into B. In Rung 5, they should be asked to sight translate from A into B.

In Rungs 6 and 7, however, the novices are again given the preparation time (Max. 10 minutes), and are respectively asked to sight interpret from English into Arabic (Rung 6) and from Arabic into English (Rung 7). In both 6 & 7, students should sight interpret while the text is being read to them through headphones. This means that they are denied access to the written versions of the texts while sight interpreting is in progress.

5.3. Diagram of the New Model

Phase 1: The Memory-Training Phase

Objective: Improve retentive memory, language command, and translation skills (when two languages are involved).

Details: Steps I, II, III, IV

Step I. Students listen to Arabic texts & recall in Arabic

Step II. Students listen to English texts & recall in English

Step III. Students listen to English texts & recall in Arabic

Step IV. Students listen to Arabic texts & recall in English

Phase 2: The Warm-Up Phase

Type of Translation: Sight translation/sight interpretation

Objective: Bolster novice interpreters' confidence through the least difficult type of translation (sight translation/sight interpretation) & eliminate withdrawal thoughts, if any, on the part of student interpreters.

Details: Rungs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 & 7.

Unstressful Sight Translation:

Rung 1: Source texts & target texts provided. Preparation time: Max. 10 minutes. Sight translating aloud.

Rung 2: No translation provided. Dictionaries allowed. Preparation time: Max. 10 minutes. Sight translating aloud.

Rung 3: No dictionaries allowed. Underlining/highlighting, and bracketing required. Preparation time: Max. 7 minutes. Sight translating aloud.

Stressful Sight Translation:

Rung 4: No preparation time. Sight-translation aloud from B into A.

Rung 5: No preparation time. Sight-translation aloud from A into B.

Unstressful Sight Interpretation:

Rung 6: Preparation time: Max. 10 minutes. Sight interpretation from B into A. Texts read through headphones. Access to written versions of texts before, but not during, interpretation process.

Rung 7: Preparation time: Max. 10 minutes. Sight interpretation from A into B. Texts read through headphones. Access to written versions of texts before, but not during, interpretation process.

Phase 3: The Intermediate Phase

Objective: Handle interpretation stress through dividing texts into segments.

Type of Translation: Liaison & Consecutive Interpretation

Details: Stages 1 & 2

Stage 1: Interviews recorded at normal speaking rate with pauses inserted. Liaison interpretation of every segment during pause time.

Stage 2:

(A) Two versions of same text (V1 & V2) recorded at normal speaking rate. (V1) short segments, (V2) longer segments. Translation provided. Consecutive interpretation during pause time. Students check the closeness of their interpretation to the translation provided.

(B) Texts recorded at normal speaking rate. Consecutive interpreting during pauses.

Phase 4: The Advanced Phase

Objective: Reach highest step on interpretation ladder.

Type of Translation: Simultaneous Interpretation

Details: Tape recorder & blank cassette tape required. Sample source text and target text provided, recorded at normal speaking rate. Experiments 1, 2, 3, 4, & 5

Experiment 1: Listen through headphones to source text. Simultaneous interpretation into Arabic. Students' interpretation process recorded.

Experiment 2: Listen to students' interpretation. Check how close to target text provided.

Experiment 3: source text & target text swap positions. Simultaneous interpretation into English. Students' interpretation recorded.

Experiment 4: Listen to students' interpretation. Check how close to text provided.

Experiment 5: Post-interpretation chat.

6. Closing Remarks

The current study focuses on two crucial points that should be taken into account in designing any interpretation programme: confidence and memory. Due to the stressful nature of interpreting, interpretation programmes should be wise enough to absorb students' tension through adopting gradual training strategies that start with the least and move up to the most difficult types of interpretation. These strategies bolster the novice's confidence and dispel the kind of withdrawal thoughts that quite commonly occur to student interpreters at the beginning of such a course.

At the same time, memory training is very important in interpretation programmes since it improves the retentive memory and language command of the novice interpreters. In advanced steps (See steps III & IV in the above diagram), memory training improves translation skills.

Based on this evaluation of the importance of memory-training and confidence-building in interpretation programmes, the current research introduces a programme that incorporates into Haddad's self-confidence strategies (2006) some training stages (memory and sight translation/sight interpretation) from the Graduate Diploma Programme at the University of Ottawa (Lambert 1991). These training stages are arranged appropriately in the new model where the objective of every phase is specified. The new model has been suggested as a potential two-year

diploma/MA programme for training interpreters at Syrian universities.

Finally, it is important to draw the attention of the novice interpreters, and perhaps of the interpretation instructors themselves, to the following three important points:

- (1) Applicants for any interpretation programme should bear in mind that two kinds of training need to be carried out: guided training and unsupervised self training. More often than not, novice interpreters, unfortunately, come to interpretation courses with a special focus on the former and underestimation, and, sometimes, a total lack of awareness of the latter. Kornakov (2000:241) argues that “Future interpreters should practice some psycholinguistic exercises, taking into account the fact that a major part of the work depends on self-training. The instructor’s role is to aid self-preparation, and to provide some useful guidelines and exercises that can be used outside the language laboratory, without an instructor or sophisticated equipment.”
- (2) Sophisticated technology and highly-equipped laboratories are not always required in interpretation. During unsupervised self training, a tape recorder together with texts recorded for training purposes at a normal speaking rate is sometimes sufficient.
- (3) It is not the task of the instructor to teach vocabulary but rather the responsibility of the student interpreter to develop her/his own. Interpretation instructors teach interpretation not languages (Kornakov 2000).

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