

Investigating Interpreters' Professional Competence

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ABSTRACT

With the economic and hi-tech globalization as well as the increasingly frequent exchanges between countries, the demand for high-caliber interpreters is constantly growing. This paper thus expounds the professional competence an interpreter needs, including core competence and auxiliary competence. It maintains that the core competence is comprised of bilingual proficiency, cross-cultural knowledge and skills closely related to interpreting. The auxiliary capacity consists of psychological quality, concentration and endurance as well as appropriate dressing code and presentation style. The paper primarily argues that student interpreters should have a clear understanding of the requirements of the professional competence of interpreters, so that they can become a qualified interpreter at an early date.

Keywords: *Interpreter, Professional competence, Bilingual proficiency, Interpreting skills, Cross-cultural knowledge.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, with the globalization of economy and technology, translators and interpreters are greatly promoting the communication between diverse cultures. A growing amount of translation work that used to be done by people is now automated, thanks to the popularization of a wide range of machine translation software. However, interpreting, as a real-time translation of oral communication between people, remains difficult to be supplanted by machine given the current technical level, because human experience, ability and on-the-spot response are hard to be replaced. Despite that, today's interpreting work also demands more from student interpreters, who are often motivated to take some nationally recognized interpreting tests to assure others that they have the adequate competence to enter the career. The paper will explore the elements of the professional competence of interpreters called for in today's market.

2. PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCE OF INTERPRETERS

The professional competence of interpreters includes core competence and auxiliary competence. The former involves bilingual proficiency, cross-cultural knowledge and core skills related to interpreting. The auxiliary

capacity includes concentration and endurance, good psychology, appropriate dressing and body language.

2.1. Interpreters' Core Professional Competence

An excellent interpreter has good core professional competence including excellent bilingual conversion ability, esp. between Chinese and English, essential interpreting skills and cross-cultural knowledge.

2.1.1. Bilingual Proficiency

Consecutive interpreting involves three steps: comprehension, memorization and re-expression. Comprehension refers to extracting meaning from a text through precise and comprehensive analysis. Memorization refers to memorizing the main content of the speech by combining brain memory and interpreting notes. Re-expression refers to expressing in the target language the message that has been understood and memorized. These three coherent steps are indispensable to successful interpreting whose standard is accuracy, fluency and fastness. Despite its emphasis on accuracy and fluency too, translation cannot be compared with interpreting in terms of speed. Translation is not rigid with the speed of code switching, so a translator can overcome the interference of form by retouching and modifying the translation

repeatedly. By contrast, the linguistic features of interpreting require a swift code switching (Chen, 2020).

To achieve this standard, the most important thing is to have good bilingual conversion ability. The biggest difficulty that many Chinese interpreter trainees often encounter is that they cannot figure out the meaning when doing English to Chinese interpretation and cannot re-express in English when doing Chinese to English interpretation. The basic reason is that their bilingual ability is insufficient. In E-C interpretation, the premise of understanding is to have a good English listening ability, without which, memorization and re-expression would gain nowhere. Likewise, when interpreting from Chinese into English, student interpreters find it difficult to re-express due to their poor command of English speaking although they have no problems with understanding the source text in their mother tongue. Both illustrate the significance of foreign language proficiency to interpreters.

With more practice, the students' foreign language ability has improved, however, they will find new difficulties in understanding Chinese and re-expressing in Chinese, which may result from a low level of the Chinese language. It is strange why a Chinese should not speak his native language well. Despite a piece of cake in daily communication, the language used in interpreting is often more informative and formal. Without an adequate linguistic and cultural background, it would be difficult even the interpreter is to hear Chinese and speak in Chinese.

Therefore, student interpreters should constantly consolidate their bilingual proficiency with more listening, speaking, reading and writing practice, among which listening and reading are linguistic input while speaking and writing are linguistic output. Student interpreters may enrich their understanding of English by tuning to English news, watching English movies and read English newspapers and magazines. Meanwhile, it is advisable for students to read more literary and academic works. In terms of speaking and writing, a Chinese student normally speaks his mother tongue fluently but should pay attention to pronunciation and cadence. As for English learning, every opportunity should be seized to communicate with native English speakers so that their oral English will gradually improve. Concerning writing, be it in Chinese or English, students normally practice not much. In this case, they can be encouraged to do more translation exercise, whose process is reading, understanding and writing. In other words, one's bilingual reading and writing ability can be improved through doing translation.

2.1.2. Key Interpreting Skills

For consecutive interpretation, there are six key skills: accurate understanding, generalization of information, logical reorganization, short-term memory, note taking and figure interpreting. Accurate understanding refers to the ability to accurately understand the main meaning and details of the original text, no matter whether Chinese or English is used by the speaker. Generalization of information refers to the ability to summarize an original text concisely in the target language and to re-express abstract concepts and cultural terms flexibly. Logical reorganization refers to the ability to interpret a speech with a clear and smooth logic, even for a speech with redundant information, confusing logics and even tongue slips.

Short-term memory refers to the ability to interpret up to ten paragraphs of around 80 words each without taking notes. Memory training is painful at the beginning, often with a blank mind. But with more practice, brain memory can be enhanced, which is also essential to the subsequent study of note-taking skills for interpreters. Interpreting notes are a set of effective notes used by interpreters to guarantee the maximal memorization of key information of the original text. However, they should only serve as a carrier for the key information unsuitable for brain memory, instead of replacing totally brain memory. In other words, it is inefficient and needless to note verbatim. As for the symbols used, they can be imitated and created through training. Noting as little as possible remains the fundamental rule for the skill. Last but not least, figure interpreting means that it is important to precisely listen, record and interpret numbers, their quantity units, and the trend of numbers, whose practice can be carried out individually or within paragraphs.

2.1.3. Cross-Cultural Knowledge

Cross-cultural knowledge is indispensable for interpreters, because interpreting involves not only skills and language, but also knowledge and terminology of various industries. To enrich cross-cultural knowledge, one can prepare from both the long-term and short-term perspectives. More specifically, short-term preparation refers to the preparation for the theme and specifics of the upcoming conference, including the special jargon, speech drafts and slides used by the speakers. The interpreter may as well have a face-to-face communication with the speakers in person, which will help him get familiar with the pronunciation and speaking styles of the speakers. Also, any problem with the conference issue can be consulted with the speakers. Before interpreting, the interpreter can sort out all the technical terms and align them into a bilingual glossary for later reference. If a speech draft is available, he can also record it into an electronic product and do mock

interpreting before the real task, so that he will not feel too tense in the real meeting.

The long-term preparation is for the interpreter to integrate interpreting into their daily life. More books and papers in the fields of interpreting should be read frequently so that the interpreter will make himself a generalist in all subjects and a professional in one or two specific areas. In this way, he can respond rapidly no matter what kind of interpreting work he is exposed to. For student interpreters, the most direct way to enrich their knowledge of language and culture is to live in a foreign country for at least half a year. For example, Chinese student interpreters can choose to live, study and work in English-speaking countries, such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and so on for six months or longer. During their stay, they may as well spend more time in the library, participate in activities organized by the hosting university and city, and integrate themselves into the life of local people. This will not only help improve their foreign tongue but also expand their cross-cultural knowledge. At present, many universities that offer BA translation have intercollegiate exchange programs, which is helpful for students to expand their linguistic and knowledge reserves.

2.2. Auxiliary Professional Skills

The auxiliary professional competence of interpreting includes concentration and endurance, good psychology, appropriate dressing and body language. During the practice or examination of interpreting, student interpreters need to concentrate on listening to the original text carefully. People should not be too relaxed or too stressed out. Many national and provincial interpreting competitions last as long as one hour, so it is necessary to have long-lasting stamina to ensure that their concentration will not be dissociated, with the quality and speed of their interpretation unaffected. Given this, student interpreters should endeavor to train themselves to do practice of interpreting for a long time and with high quality. During practice, phone usage or anything irrelevant should be forbidden. Instead, the interpreter is supposed to devote himself completely to it. As most of the interpreting tests are held in sound labs where the sound insulation effect is not very good, examinees should exercise deliberately with some noise in background before taking such tests so that they will be adapted more quickly to the exam room setting. They can play music or irrelevant sounds on a computer or a mobile phone, to see if they can concentrate on their exercise. It is believed that they will not be affected by the ambient noise after practicing in this way for some time.

Good psychology is also crucial to interpreters. For most of the time, student interpreters complain that they are not very nervous in practice or even in school

exams, but why are they nervous in certificate exams and competitions? This is mainly due to the excessive attention given to the results of these tests. But for interpreters, if you have stage fright in the exam, you are likely to suffer from stage fright in interpreting (Lei, 2018). In fact, as long as student interpreters practice conscientiously under the guidance of their teachers in spare time, no contest or exam needs to be so tense or focused. Examinees are supposed to take such opportunities to assert and improve themselves. Besides, there is no need to care about who you are competing with. It is pointless to compare with others. Rather, like mastering other techniques, one should just focus on the skill itself, checking regularly his progress and having more confidence and encouragement. The following are eight suggestions that help boost one's psychological stability when interpreting.

Firstly, take every interpreting practice and exam opportunity seriously with the correct attitude. Secondly, do not be afraid to make mistakes and lose face: learn from setbacks to do better. Thirdly, do not give up halfway: once starting, try to finish your interpretation even if you do not hear clearly. Fourthly, while interpreting on the stage, you should control your emotion: neither be too excited nor be too nervous. Fifthly, when listening to long passages, overcome anxiety, pass those parts you fail to hear clearly, and comfort yourself that speech is about to end. Sixthly, even if you are not interested in a topic, fancy it as something beautiful and interpret it with zest. Seventh, before the new speech begins, predict what to say next in a few seconds. Eighth, do not be delirious when you have done a good paragraph; nor collapse when you have screwed up another one. Always take the next paragraph as the first one. The interpreter's good psychological quality is not only reflected in the processing of the speech itself, but also in his ability to respond to various unexpected situations on the scene (Luo, 2018).

Finally, interpreters should have proper body language and dressing code. They should not dress casually in a formal contest though comfort comes first. They had better have frequent eye contact with the judges with occasional smile. Also, they should remember not to swing too much when speaking on the stage.

3. CONCLUSION

In a word, this paper discusses in detail the core professional qualities and auxiliary abilities that interpreters need to possess. The core professional quality includes bilingual proficiency, cross-cultural knowledge and skills closely related to interpreting. The auxiliary ability includes good psychological quality, concentration and endurance as well as appropriate clothing and speech manner. It is argued that student

interpreters should acquire such competence repertoire under the guidance of their trainers through persistent practice.

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